

ROMANS

THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Chapters 9:1-16:27

TITUS CHU

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by Titus Chu

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SECTION SIX

GOD'S
CHOOSING

An Overview of God's Choosing

For though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls.

—Romans 9:11

So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

—Romans 9:18

WORD STUDY

The Greek word translated “choice” in Romans 9:11 is *eklogē*, which means “election, choice” and can be thought of as “the act of picking out, choosing” (Thayer, 197). The Lord’s choosing, or election, is closely related to the thought expressed in Psalm 103:19: “The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all.”

Romans 9 begins a new section of Paul’s thought, the thread of which will run through chapter 11. In this section, Paul heavily emphasizes the matters of God’s choosing, predestination, and will. It is concerning this section that H. Alford writes of our “being compelled to acknowledge the

divine sovereignty on the one hand, and human free will on the other” (Alford, 2:402). Alford also warns the reader of the tendency to lose sight of one while focusing on the other. M. R. Vincent agrees, writing that these chapters “are the most difficult of Paul’s writings, [and] have been most misunderstood and misapplied” (Vincent, 3:133).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The next section in Romans, chapters 9–11, can be categorized as a section covering God’s choice (9:11). His choosing is according to His sovereignty and is worked out in His sovereign economy.

Organic Salvation and God’s Sovereignty

Paul’s central focus in Romans is the gospel of God, the content of which is God’s organic salvation (Rom. 1:15–16). However, no matter how rich this organic salvation is, it can only be experienced by those who understand God’s sovereignty and submit themselves to it. Our experience of God’s organic salvation is according to our acknowledgement of His sovereignty. This is why Paul begins to talk about God’s sovereignty and His sovereign economy after chapter 8. The extent to which God’s organic salvation operates in us and constitutes us is absolutely related to our recognition of God’s sovereignty. The more we recognize and remain under God’s sovereignty, the more we will experience His organic salvation.

Our enjoyment of the gospel of God comes from our living in God’s organic salvation. Yet to live in this organic salvation requires knowing God’s sovereignty. If someone asked me what the most important thing is for a Christian, I would answer, “To love the Lord.” It is for those who love the

Lord that all of God's riches are prepared. Yet, as our love for the Lord grows, there are also two crucial items for our Christian life: God's organic salvation and God's sovereignty. These two matters match and run parallel to each other. A person who abides, lives, and grows in God's organic salvation must not only enjoy the divine life but must also know God's sovereignty.

Knowing God's Sovereignty

To know and fully trust God's sovereignty is immeasurably valuable for a Christian. Many find it difficult to forsake everything to follow the Lord, to fully trust in Him, and to live a Christian life not dependent on human methods and abilities. On the one hand, they may love the Lord, desire to pursue Him, and even consecrate themselves to Him; on the other hand, they may also seek their own ways, consider service to the Lord a career or enterprise, see the church as a social group, and seek their own benefit among the churches. We may wonder how both of these attitudes can be found in the same people. It is because even as they follow the Lord, they do not know God's sovereignty, so His organic salvation is limited in them.

God's sovereignty is a wonderful thing! As we recognize His sovereignty, we are able to enjoy more of His organic salvation. As we who love the Lord enjoy the bountiful supply found in His organic salvation, our knowledge of His sovereignty will grow deeper and our assurance of His sovereignty will be strengthened. The more we are saved and grow, the more we will see that our life of following the Lord is just as Romans 9:16 says: "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."

The more manifested people's functions are in the church and the deeper their ministry becomes, the more they should realize that they are nothing but a vessel in the Potter's hands.

God is the Potter, and it is His will that some vessels would be made for honor and others for dishonor (Rom. 9:21). This is true, yet it is also true that these ones have needed to recognize God's sovereignty in the process of their shaping. Their cooperation with God and their recognition of His sovereignty was necessary for their growth, manifestation, and rich ministry. Such cooperation and recognition is also a foundation for God's work in us over the course of our whole life.

A person who has seen God, known Him in life, grown in Him, gained Him in His blessing, and experienced being held in His powerful hands can only say, "What a sovereign God I have! He is the Lord over everything. He is the Lord over every experience in my life, over every day, over every section of time, and even over this whole universe. He is the Lord of all things and every event, and even the Lord who gives all divine things to us. He really is the Lord!"

Fully Trusting God's Sovereignty

Those who understand God's sovereignty will have an unexplainable restfulness and composure. They will experience the peace the Lord Jesus promised when He said, "Peace I leave with you" (John 14:27). The Lord said this even though He would soon experience His prayer in Gethsemane, the humbling and humiliation of His trials, the pain of brutal scourges, the enduring of intense thirst, and a solemn death on the cross. He truly experienced much suffering and sorrow. Though He knew He would experience all of these, He was incredibly composed and restful. How? He knew that God is sovereign, and that it was under this sovereignty that His path was measured to Him.

In the beginning of our Christian life, we come to know God's blessing. As we follow the Lord for the rest of our life, we come to know what God has measured to us in His sovereignty.

This knowledge will cause us to extol and praise God and will bring us to worship Him with sincerity of heart.

Three Questions for a Healthy Church Life

There are three questions we can ask to tell whether a church is healthy or not. The first is, "Do the saints love the Lord, experience His life, and have enjoyment in His life?" If so, the second is, "Are they experiencing His organic salvation?" If so, the third question is, "Do they also experience, understand, and surrender to God's sovereignty?" Each question is important, although we often do not consider the third. If we do not submit ourselves to God's sovereignty, it is impossible for us to fully enjoy His rich organic salvation, and a healthy church life will not be produced.

God's work in us begins with His divine life, and the first response of the divine life in us is love. When people believe into the Lord, they gain eternal life (John 3:16). The reaction of this life in them allows them to both know the love of God and become people loving God. We must never neglect the divine life or the divine love. When we touch life, love is produced toward the Lord. A person who loves God in life is able to grow in His organic salvation and will experience many things under God's sovereignty. God is sovereign, and everything He does is under His sovereignty.

Though we start with a love for the Lord, a healthy Christian life and healthy church life also involve enjoying God's organic salvation and recognizing His divine sovereignty. If we richly enjoy God's life and experience His organic salvation, yet do not understand His sovereignty, the growth of His life in us will be limited and our enjoyment will not last long. Similarly, if we are rich in the knowledge of God's sovereignty but short of the experience of His organic salvation, the divine sovereignty will not be as effective to us, and we will feel totally beaten down, disciplined, and dealt with by God.

We should worship God for the experiences of both His organic salvation and His sovereignty. His divine life is within us, and His divine sovereignty affects everything that surrounds us. To know and remain under God's sovereignty is to understand that in every environment, God is the One arranging, preparing, and accomplishing all things. We have the divine life within us, and the environment around us has been arranged and measured by God. When these two match each other in our understanding, a healthy growth of life is produced, and we become a blessing to the church.

Two Aspects of a Mature Church

A healthy church life not only requires divine life, divine love, and the enjoyment of Christ, but also a living in one accord with God's organic salvation and divine sovereignty. Organic salvation is inward, but God's sovereignty—His dominion and arrangement—touches outward things. If all the saints in a church know the divine life, enjoy and abide in life, trust God, and appreciate His divine sovereignty, then that church will be healthy, mature, and full of vitality.

The degree of our maturity and healthiness and that of the church is always relative and never absolute. No one can reach the fullness of maturity, even after many years. Paul himself, a great apostle with rich revelations and experiences, testified in his old age, "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12).

Maturity is relative, not absolute. It is proportional to our experience of God's organic salvation and our understanding of His divine sovereignty. When we serve the church, we should constantly ask, "How much do the saints inwardly know the divine life? How much do they enjoy and apply this life? How much are they constituted with this life?"

How much do the saints trust the divine sovereignty in their outward environment? How much do they cooperate with it?" The more we experience and realize both organic salvation and divine sovereignty, the healthier and more mature our church life will become.

We must have some recognition of God's sovereignty if we hope to mature. I know a brother who used to be a university professor. He had a very nice house yet later sold it for the sake of the church's needs, offering all of the money to the Lord. It would have been very easy for us to tell him, according to our own feeling at the time, that he should care for his own life and the needs of his family. Yet the Lord said to me at that time, "When a person knows My sovereignty and is willing to offer everything to Me, do not frustrate him. Have you forgotten what Mary did in offering to Me her costly perfume of pure nard?" Oh, today I can look back and say that this brother was truly a servant of the Lord! He recognized God's sovereignty and could therefore be used by the Lord.

Telling the Truth in Christ

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 9:1

WORD STUDY

Paul begins Romans 9 by asserting his earnestness and simplicity in the phrase, “I am telling the truth in Christ.” The Greek word translated here as “truth,” *alētheia*, was often used objectively to signify “the reality lying at the base of an appearance; the manifested, veritable essence of a matter” (Vine, 645). The phrase “in Christ,” *en Christō*, does not indicate that Paul was making an oath, which would render the Greek, “by Christ.” Rather, it indicates Paul’s union with Christ. It was in this union with Christ that he was speaking the truth (Alford, 2:403).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In Romans 9–11, Paul talks about God’s choice, which involves His sovereignty and sovereign economy. The first five verses of chapter 9 are like a preface. Verse 1 begins

with, “I am telling the truth in Christ,” and verse 5 ends with, “Christ...who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.” In other words, this simple preface begins with “I,” Paul, and ends with “God,” Christ, who is over all.

One with God in Christ

The administration of God’s sovereignty is revealed to those who, like Paul, are one with God in Christ. Gentiles who do not know God and Christians who do not love God see many things through the lens of lucky or unlucky. This is because they lack knowledge regarding God’s sovereignty. As we become more and more one with God in Christ, we will have no thought of luck as we truly know and appreciate His sovereignty.

Sincerity in Christ

Paul knew God’s sovereignty, and his character was extremely healthy. He was a sincere person in Christ. He seemed to say here to the Romans, “I want to begin talking about God’s sovereignty, but you need to first know that I am sincere in Christ. What I speak in Christ is truth; it is not a lie.”

Generally speaking, unbelievers are not sincere. They may not blatantly cheat others, but they often do not speak the whole truth. They only say what benefits themselves. Their words are not completely false, but neither are they completely true. People are complicated and are almost always short of sincerity.

Christians who do not actively live in Christ can also act without sincerity, just like any other person. We are usually not sincere to people, to the truth, or to the Lord. Paul’s sincerity meant he was willing to present himself before

the Lord with honesty and to present himself in Christ to other people with honesty as well. This allowed him to gain an assurance regarding his sovereign God and also allowed him to receive divine revelation from God. Even Paul's conscience testified in the Holy Spirit that he was a sincere man. May we also develop such sincerity in Christ before God and before people.

The Testimony of Paul's Conscience

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 9:1

WORD STUDY

The phrase “testifies with me” can also be translated “bearing witness with me” (e.g., Darby). In other words, Paul’s conscience concurred with his testimony (Vincent, 3:99). This concurring testimony was “in the Holy Spirit.” Much as the earlier phrase “in Christ” could signify a union with Christ, this phrase could indicate a union with the Holy Spirit. H. Alford calls this “a conscience not left to itself but informed and enlightened by the Spirit of God” (Alford, 2:403).

The Greek word for “conscience,” *suneidēsis*, is composed of three Greek words: *sun*, *oida*, and the suffix *sis*. When used as a prefix, the Greek preposition *sun* denotes association, community, fellowship, and participation. In this sense, it can be translated “together, with” (Thayer, 599). *Oida*, one of the two most common Greek words translated “to know,” often refers to an intuitive knowledge, an awareness or perception that comes from within (Thayer, 172–174). Thus, *suneidēsis* implies some kind of fellowship or togetherness of

knowledge. The phrase “in the Holy Spirit” is therefore even more crucial, as it indicates Paul’s conscience was the place of co-knowledge between him and the Holy Spirit.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In Romans 9:1, Paul first talks about his sincerity in Christ and then goes on to talk about his conscience. The Greek phrase for “testifies with me” can also be translated “bearing witness with me.” This shows that Paul’s spirit was healthy and operated in a healthy way.

Revelation and Recognition

The Greek word for “conscience,” *suneidēsis*, is composed of three words: *sun* (union), *oida* (to know), and *sis*, a suffix indicating an action, process, or the result of that action (Robinson, 140). *Oida* indicates our subjective knowledge of God that comes from within our spirit, based on the revelation God gives us in our spirit (see chapter 87). God gives revelation in our spirit and it becomes subjective knowledge (*oida*) as our spirit recognizes and lays hold of it. When our subjective recognition of God’s revelations becomes united with us, it results in our conscience. Thus, our conscience is always changing and being refined as we receive more revelation, recognize this revelation, and become united with it.

Because revelation and recognition differ between people, everyone’s conscience is different. For example, should wine be served at a church dinner? The answer is a matter of our recognition in our conscience. For another example, should we restrict our diets to vegetables, or should we also eat meat? Paul addresses this matter in Romans 14. It is a matter of conscience.

As believers, our conscience is always related to our subjective recognition before the Lord. An unbeliever may say, “I say to you with my conscience....” However, their conscience is on a totally different plane from ours, because their spirit is still dead and they have had no inward and subjective recognition of God. Our conscience is related to our recognition of God in our spirit. When our living is in one accord with our recognition in spirit, our conscience will be right.

A Good Conscience

Our conscience is related to our spiritual recognition. The more we come to the Holy Spirit, the more we will receive revelation. The more we recognize and lay hold of such revelation, the healthier our conscience will be, and the more united we will be with God.

Paul said that his conscience testified with him in the Holy Spirit. Such a phrasing shows that our spiritual recognition is based on the continual revelation of the Holy Spirit. It also shows that when we are in one accord with what we have seen in spirit, this oneness results in our conscience abiding in the Holy Spirit. If there is a disconnect between us and what we have seen in spirit, it becomes very hard for our conscience to abide in the Holy Spirit. If this abiding is not produced, our spiritual growth becomes stunted, and we are eventually unable to bear fruit of life.

A good conscience is the result of a process in the Holy Spirit. This process begins by our living in the presence of the Lord, where we can receive revelation. This revelation is then subjectively recognized in our spirit. Through this process, we obtain “instant” words from God—words that deal with our current condition, situation, and environment. These words are full of feeling and can touch us deeply. They may be words regarding things like our character, a certain relationship, or even a situation at work. These words from

God are meant to lead us, and when we bring ourselves into oneness with them, this results in a good conscience, which produces the fruit of life.

Paul seems to be saying here, “I am going to talk about myself now. I am a healthy person: I am sincere, I do not lie, and my conscience is active and healthy. My conscience is totally related to God. I am in one accord both with the revelation of God and my spirit’s recognition of such revelation. This is my conscience in the Holy Spirit—a conscience in one accord with God.”

A Conscience in One Accord with God

A conscience in one accord with God is a conscience united with Him. In other words, a conscience in the Holy Spirit totally matches what is in God. This means that whatever bothers, frustrates, or even embarrasses God will also bother, frustrate, and embarrass us. As God becomes more and more constituted in us, our conscience becomes healthy and proper. This was Paul’s condition when he said, “My conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit.”

Great Sorrow and Unceasing Grief

*That I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.
³For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from
Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to
the flesh.*

—Romans 9:2–3

WORD STUDY

In these verses lies an expression of Paul’s deep sympathy for his kinsmen according to the flesh, the Israelites (9:4). He speaks of both great sorrow (*lupē*) and unceasing grief (*odunē*) in his heart. The Greek word *lupē* literally means “sadness, grief, heaviness” (Strong, #3077) and signifies that Paul’s heart was in a state of heaviness or sorrow (Rogers, 332). The Greek word *odunē* literally means “grief” (Strong, #3601), but unlike *lupē*, this grief is the anguish or sting of the heart which results from sorrow (Rogers, 332). According to M. R. Vincent, *odunē* is better rendered “pain” and may indicate a kind of consuming pain (Vincent, 3:99). The reason for Paul’s grief is given in verse 3: the fact that most of his brethren, the Jews, had not come to Christ.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Paul was fully mindful of being under God's sovereignty, yet in verse 2 he said, "I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart." Why would he feel this way?

We might think that sorrow is only a feeling for people who do not understand God's sovereignty. If people understand the sovereignty of God, why would they still have sorrow? Shouldn't they be restful and content, trusting that the Lord of all things holds their lives in His hands? Yet Paul had sorrow, even great sorrow, and unceasing grief in his heart. These feelings were not because of a lack of knowledge concerning God's sovereignty. Rather, they were produced because Paul knew God's heart and desire in His sovereignty.

The Sorrow Caused by God's Sovereign Will

To know God's sovereignty is one thing, but to know God's heart and desire in His sovereignty is another thing. For example, a person could be in a car accident. (Even though this could be an attack by Satan, such a thing is still under God's sovereignty. Every attack by Satan has been permitted by God, and so every Satan-inspired event is still under God's sovereignty.) This person might fully believe this accident was under God's sovereignty, yet the accident may not cause any seeking of God or change of heart. However, with a view of the sovereignty of God, this accident could cause this person to seek for God's heart and desire, asking, "What does God really want? Why would He allow such an accident to happen to me? What is God doing in me?" An understanding of God's sovereignty should help us look for God's purpose behind our experiences, and such seeking can lead us to God's very heart and desire.

Paul's experience was very similar. He would probably say to us, "I not only know God's sovereignty, but I also know

His sovereign will. I have an understanding both of God's sovereignty and of His will in His sovereignty." It was this understanding that caused Paul to have great sorrow and unceasing grief in his heart. He realized not only that his kinsmen were disobedient to the gospel, but that even this was the will of God.

Human Virtue

Paul understood the sovereign will of God, and this caused him sorrow. In his humanity, then, he was full of feeling toward God and toward His will. Sorrow was produced because he saw that under God's sovereignty, his kinsmen had been cut off from God. This sorrow manifested itself in Paul as the human virtue of grief. Paul not only understood and aligned himself with God's sovereign will but was also filled with human virtue. His "great sorrow" was related to seeing God's sovereignty concerning his fellow Israelites, and his "unceasing grief" was related to his human virtue.

For a believer, human virtue is the manifestation of the divine life through our humanity. In Paul's case here, it looked like grief. Such a response is proper when judgment is involved. When a brother judges others, he should always do so with tears. If someone were to say, "This saint is really a lot of trouble," do not sharply answer, "Why are you surprised? The church is filled with problems!" Such a response may be correct, but it is totally lacking in the human virtue of grief.

When we were regenerated and God entered us as life, all of His attributes entered us also. Human virtue is the outward manifestation of these divine attributes. As God's life grows within us, divinity is expressed and manifested through our humanity. When God entered us, we began to love Him. As the divine life grows in us, our love for the Lord also grows, and the more our love for Him grows, the more the divine

life grows. More and more, the attributes of God are able to bear fruit and be manifested from within us. This expression of God's attributes from us is true human virtue.

The living out of human virtue is based on the divine life and nature being constituted in our humanity. As our natural humanity is continually infused and reconstituted with God's life and nature, a humanity constituted by divinity is produced. God's desire is that divinity would not only enter us, but that it would also grow in us and be expressed by us. The result of living out God's divine life is a transformed, renewed, and uplifted humanity that is related to God's will and economy. True human virtue is not attainable by our natural birth; it is the result of the operation and constituting work of the triune God in us.

The Forsaking of Israel

Verse 2 shows Paul's human virtue, and verse 3 reveals the reason for his sorrow and grief—the situation of his brethren and kinsmen according to the flesh. Paul seemed to say here, “I can see the condition of Israel today, and it is really pitiful.” The Israelites at one time were the good branches of the olive tree (Rom. 11:24), and all the divine things belonged to them. Yet they crucified the Messiah they were waiting for and rejected His salvation. The gospel was then preached to the Gentiles. Despite the blessings enjoyed by the Gentiles, Paul was filled with sorrow and grief in his heart because his brothers and kinsmen according to the flesh were temporarily laid aside by God.

The Israelites surely seemed to have been forsaken. When Paul considered this matter, he saw it from the aspect of the divine will, and it produced in his human virtue a very real reaction. Seemingly, God had totally departed from the Israelites. He had begun to work with the Gentiles, and the object of His attention no longer seemed to be the children

of Israel. Oh, what a sober thought, that God's chosen people were forsaken!

When Paul thought about his kinsmen according to the flesh, he was filled with emotion, and in his humanity, sorrow and grief were expressed. The Israelites were God's elect, and it was among them that God chose to tabernacle. Yet even the Israelites, who built the holy temple and became God's kingdom, had fallen to such an extent. Oh, we cannot help but have sorrow for such a people and situation!

Paul's statement in verse 3 is very bold: "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren." It was not easy for Paul to say this. Even though the Israelites forced God to turn to the Gentiles by rejecting Christ and His salvation, Paul still felt, "The Israelites are my brothers. They are my kinsmen according to the flesh, God's beloved and chosen ones." Verse 3 is a testimony of Paul's human virtue. His natural humanity was constituted with God's life and nature, and the divine attributes shone through his human virtue. This constitution caused him to respond appropriately to God's sovereign will.

Paul had an extremely high understanding of God's sovereignty. He saw a great picture—the Israelites, as the branches of an olive tree, cut off and laid aside, that the Gentiles, as the wild olive branches, might be grafted in to enjoy the rich root of the olive tree (Rom. 11:17). Inwardly, Paul was very clear that the Israelites were useless and hopeless in God's work. However, when he thought of his brothers, he was very sorrowful, and in his humanity, he had great grief.

Matching God's Feeling

Paul's feeling regarding the Israelites was also God's feeling. To this day, God has laid aside the Israelites, yet He is not happy about it. His desire was to gain the Israelites first and then to gain the Gentiles through them. God has cut off the

Israelites from the olive tree and has grafted the wild Gentile olive branches to it. Though He is certainly sovereign over His economy, He still has strong feeling for the Israelites. Like Paul, He has great sorrow and unceasing grief in His heart.

Those who have been saved for many years should ask themselves, “Have I ever had such sorrow for the brothers and sisters? Have I ever suffered inwardly for them? Have I ever shed tears for the church?” When those who serve the Lord recognize God’s sovereignty and see that God wants to build the church, they cannot help but weep. When they see that God wants to gain His testimony, they cannot help but fast and pray. When they see God’s work on the earth, they cannot help but consecrate themselves to the Lord.

If we are those who are related to God, who know His sovereignty, and who see His sovereign economy, we will be filled with God’s own feelings. We will even express these divine feelings through our human virtues as did Paul, who had great sorrow and unceasing grief in his heart for his brothers according to the flesh.

The Wish of a Man Absolute for God

For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

—Romans 9:3

WORD STUDY

Paul's statement in Romans 9:3 is greatly debated among Christian scholars and commentators, who struggle to understand why Paul would have such a strong desire. The phrase, "I could wish," is written in the Greek imperfect tense, which often portrays an action without regard for beginning or end (Wallace, 752). Thus, this phrase has been translated, "I was wishing" (Young's Literal). However, several scholars consider the sense of this imperfect phrase to be of an unfinished act—a wish begun that has not yet been carried out (Vincent, 3:99; Alford, 2:403).

The Greek word used here for "accursed" is a noun, *anathema*. This is different than the Greek word *katara*, which was used in Galatians 3:13 to describe the curse Christ was made on our behalf on the cross. *Anathema* is frequently used in the Septuagint as a translation for the Hebrew word *cherem*, which means "a thing devoted to God." *Anathema* is used

both for the “devoted offerings” to the Lord in Leviticus 27:28 and idols “doomed to destruction” in Deuteronomy 7:26 (Vine, 141). In the New Testament, *anathema* may hold both meanings simultaneously, indicating a thing or person devoted to God for destruction (Rogers, 332). Scholars and commentators debate how far this “destruction” goes in Paul’s case, that is, whether Paul means he would wish to suffer exclusion, excommunication, or even natural death.

However, H. Alford says that *anathema* always denotes a devotion to perdition, indicating Paul may have been willing to suffer eternal perdition and separation from Christ on behalf of his kinsmen. He further writes, “It is the expression of an affectionate and self-denying heart, willing to surrender all things, if thereby he could obtain for his beloved people those blessings of the Gospel which he now enjoyed, but from which they were excluded.... Others express their love by professing themselves ready to give their life for their friends; [Paul] declares the intensity of his affection by reckoning even his spiritual life not too great a price, if it might purchase their salvation” (Alford, 2:403–404).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Romans 9:3 may be one of the hardest verses to interpret in the Bible. The phrase “I could wish” has an imperfect tense in Greek, showing that Paul may have had such a thought in the past and now utters this extreme and serious word.

We may think that such a statement would greatly offend the Lord. Our thought may be that the Lord would not be happy with us if we told Him that we wished to be separated from Him for the sake of another. This verse should challenge us. We must try to understand why Paul would say something so strong. As we consider his personality, his revelation, his

consecration, and his operation, we may begin to understand why his desire was so strong in this verse.

Consecrated as an Offering

In Greek, “accursed” (*anathema*) means something devoted to God forever. The Greek language is very interesting. Some words can be translated multiple ways, some ways seeming extremely positive and others seeming extremely negative. The translation “something devoted to God forever” seems positive, the translation “curse” seems most negative, yet they are both translations of the same word.

The noun *anathema* and its verb form *anathemai* are both used in the Greek translation of Leviticus 27:28: “Nevertheless, anything which a man sets apart to the Lord out of all that he has, of man or animal or of the fields of his own property, shall not be sold or redeemed. Anything devoted to destruction is most holy to the Lord.” Both words seem to be used positively in this verse. Even the thought of something “devoted to destruction” is followed by the statement that it is “most holy to the Lord.” There is a possibility that Paul used this positive meaning of *anathema* to indicate his consecration. In other words, Paul may have wished to be completely consecrated to the Lord for the sake of the Israelites, even to the point that he would be totally burned up and destroyed in order for God to work in him and through him.

The word spoken in this verse seems extreme, but it shows that although Paul understood God and His sovereignty, he was also full of love. To what extent did Paul love? His love was like the love the Lord Jesus has toward us. The Lord forsook Himself and was even forsaken by God for the sake of His love toward us. Paul was like this. He loved his brothers to such an extent that he was willing to be separated from Christ for their sakes.

Paul's Absoluteness

Paul's subjective recognition of God included at least four aspects: the salvation of Christ, God's sovereignty, God's economy, and God's operation within His economy. Based on this, Paul's use of *anathema* does not seem logical. By all four aspects, though he may have wished it, Paul understood that it was impossible for him to be "accursed, separated from Christ."

Because Paul recognized the salvation of Christ and God's sovereignty, which he described in Romans 8, he knew he could never be separated from Christ as a curse. As someone committed to God for His heart's desire and economy, Paul again knew it was impossible for him to be separated from Christ. Even according to God's operation in His economy, Paul recognized that both the Israelites and Gentiles would eventually be glorified together (Rom. 11:25–29). According to all four of these aspects, it was illogical for Paul to wish to be accursed in such a way.

Why was Paul's wish so strong here? To understand this verse, we must consider his statement in view of his personality, not his revelation. What kind of person was Paul? By studying him in the Bible, we find that he was intensely absolute for God and for God's will.

The same sentiment in Romans 9:3 can be seen in Paul's letter to the saints in Philippi. He wrote that he was willing to become a drink offering to be poured upon the offering of their faith (Phil. 2:17). A drink offering, in which a special portion of wine was poured out on a sacrifice, indicates death (see also 2 Tim. 4:6). For the sake of the Philippians, Paul was willing to die and become a drink offering poured out upon the sacrifice and service of their faith. He seemed to say to the Philippians, "Because you love the Lord so much and stand so strongly in one accord for the advancement of the gospel, I am willing to die to be poured out upon the offering of your faith."

Paul's absoluteness can also be seen in his harsh words for those who do not love the Lord: "If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed" (1 Cor. 16:22). This word is very harsh! If we stood up in a church meeting and said, "Brothers, if you do not love the Lord, you are accursed," we would probably be thrown out by the congregation!

Paul's words were sometimes very hard, but this was because they came out of his absoluteness. Because he was an absolute person, his words were also absolute. He even wrote that he would rather die than use the right to live from the gospel, lest his boasting be made void (1 Cor. 9:14–15). How many people would dare to say such a word today? Shouldn't those who preach the gospel have the authority to live by the gospel? Yet Paul said that he would rather die than use this right. Likewise, when he saw the believers in Philippi loving the Lord so much, he was ready to die to pour himself out for their sake.

Paul absolutely trusted in God, absolutely kept his charge received from God, absolutely poured himself out, and absolutely struggled for the gospel and for each saint in the church. This was Paul—an absolute person for the Lord.

A Response to God's Heart

Paul later writes that a partial hardening had happened to Israel "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25–26). Paul realized that God, in His sovereignty, wanted a "fullness." This understanding changed his view and attracted him. He saw that the transgression of the Israelites resulted in riches for the world and that their failure resulted in riches for the Gentiles, but that their fullness will be even more rich (v. 12)!

Paul knew that God did not desire to forsake the Israelites for the sake of the Gentiles. God wants to obtain a fullness that includes both Gentiles and Israelites. Because of this

glorious revelation of God's heart, as well as Paul's great love for his kinsmen, Paul strongly desired to see the Israelites saved and the nation of Israel brought to its fullness. Because of his revelation, Paul could wish, seemingly beyond reason, to be accursed, separated from Christ for his brothers according to the flesh, the Israelites.

Paul's boldness was not only because of his human love but also because he saw what God wanted. Those who follow the Lord should be so bold because they see what God wants. Consider Paul—over and over, he did not count the cost or consider himself; he was full of love and saw the glorious fullness God desires; he absolutely consecrated himself to the Lord for this fullness, and boldly declared that he was willing to be accursed, even separated from Christ, for it to happen!

If we understand this verse in this way, we will not consider Paul's expression too excited or emotional. Rather, we will sense that Paul was genuinely filled with a burden. His visions and revelations gave him this serious and intense desire. May we tell the Lord, "I would like to become like Paul. I, too, would like to be absolute and able to disregard everything for the sake of Your sovereign and eternal will!"

Honoring God's Work

Who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, ⁵whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

—Romans 9:4–5

WORD STUDY

In Romans 9:4–5, Paul describes the incredible privileges the Israelites had enjoyed for many centuries in their relationship with God. His point, as H. Alford writes, is to show that “not only on their relationship to himself does he ground [his] sorrow and self-devotion, but on the recollection of their ancient privileges and glories” (Alford, 2:404).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

At the beginning of Romans 9, Paul testified that he was a sincere person and that his conscience in the Holy Spirit was in one accord with God (v. 1). Realizing God's sovereignty, he had great sorrow concerning God's economy and was full

of the human virtue of grief (v. 2). At the same time, he also lived in love and was willing to sacrifice everything for the benefit of his brothers according to the flesh (v. 3). Now, in verses 4 and 5, Paul greatly honors God's work in relation to the nation of Israel. Taken together, these five verses reveal much to us about Paul and his character.

Honoring the Work of God

Very few people are like Paul, who so highly honored the work of God's hand. God seemed to have forsaken the Israelites, yet Paul took note of the adoption as sons, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the temple service, the promises of God, the fathers, and even the fleshly lineage of Christ. When Paul considered God's work among the Israelites, his heart was full of honor.

We usually do not honor the work of the Lord. Because we do not see the eternal nature of the Lord's work, we tend to despise and forsake some of His servants while honoring and accepting others. If we do not honor the work of God's hand, it becomes very hard for us to have a complete application, appreciation, and honoring of the divine sovereignty as we follow the Lord.

Why do we so often fail to honor the work of God's hand? It is because we are self-absorbed and short of the true human virtue that expresses divine attributes. Paul's humanity was one with God; that is, his human virtue was constituted with the divine attributes. Since God loves and cares for people, Paul loved and cared for people. God was willing to become salvation for mankind, so Paul was willing to preach this gospel in order that people might be saved.

Accordingly, Paul lived under God's sovereignty and was full of honor toward the work of His hand. His appreciation for God's work was based on his oneness with God and His sovereign economy. Paul seemed to be saying, "In God's

economy, the Israelites have been laid aside and have lost their value. However, they are the work of God's hand, so I will absolutely honor the work of God among them." Paul had learned the deep lesson that no matter how spiritual he was, how high his knowledge of God's economy was, or how many spiritual things were opened to him, God's work deserves absolute honor.

Paul's Broad Honoring

Paul attributed many high things to the Israelites. His description of them is glorious because he saw them as God's work. Yet, after such a glorious description, he later mentions another glory. In chapter 11 he says, "But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify (glorify) my ministry" (Rom. 11:13). It is not easy to say such a thing. Very few people understand how difficult it is to value one's own ministry while still honoring the work of God among others.

We must all learn this difficult lesson. We cannot forsake what God has committed to us, but we must still honor His work among others. The apostle Paul had learned to do this. He was an apostle of the Gentiles, and he magnified his ministry. Yet, he was simultaneously full of honor for God's work among the Israelites. Even while Paul honored his own apostleship among the Gentiles, he was broad, inclusive, and respectful of others.

Very few people today are like Paul, who had a high spiritual understanding of God's sovereignty. Today, very few are able to hold fast to the commitment God has given them while at the same time honoring the work of His hand among others. Over the years, I have gathered together with many saints as local churches according to the truth the Lord has unveiled in His Word through Watchman Nee. Even over decades, the Lord has never asked us to forsake the matter of

the local church. No matter how much turmoil and frustration there has been among the churches, we still tell the Lord, “This is what You have shown us, and this is the commitment You have given to us. Concerning this measure, this vision, and this commitment, we cannot forsake it or drop it. Lord, we consecrate ourselves to You and to Your church.”

We cannot forsake the commitment God has given us, but it is also important that we have God’s broadness to honor the work of His hand among others. The greatest manifestation and measurement of people’s spiritual life is their broadness and inclusiveness. For example, when we meet a brother or sister who is a Lutheran, a Baptist, or a Presbyterian, we should honor them. We should recognize that they also have the Lord, and they even love and serve Him. God works in and on those who love Him and serve Him, wherever they are. We should learn to honor this work of God.

The Attitude of God’s Workers

Those who cannot honor the work done by God’s hand cannot do God’s work. Such people will be exclusive as they try to carry out the work of God. Unless we realize that God is the all-inclusive One and that everything out of and related to Christ is pleasing to Him, we cannot do His work.

For many who love the Lord, this may be the hardest lesson to learn. Very few people have the same understanding as Paul, who considered not only his own apostleship among the Gentiles glorious but also God’s work among the Israelites. Paul’s vision was that everything out of God related to His economy and accomplished by His hand is glorious. Today, God can work only through those whose living honors the work of His hand.

Paul’s thought seemed to be, “I am an apostle among the Gentiles, so I glorify my ministry. However, I have also seen the work of God upon the Israelites. His work is so good,

so vast, so rich, so glorious, and so precious that I cannot help but worship Him and honor His work among them.” Only because of such an attitude could God work through Paul among the Gentiles. Paul not only placed himself under God’s sovereignty but also absolutely honored the work of God’s sovereign hand.

The Eternal Value of God’s Work

How could Paul honor the work of God’s hand among the Israelites? It was because he knew that God’s gifts and calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). The condition of Israel before God today may not be so positive, but that is another matter altogether. We should understand that God’s work and calling of His people has eternal value.

When God gained Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Old Testament, He gained them for eternity. When God gained Martin Luther in the 16th century, this was also for eternity. All of God’s servants through the ages were gained by Him for eternity. Even today, we cannot give up Martin Luther’s proclamation of justification by faith. We cannot give up the riches of the inner life of the Mystics, the brotherly love practiced by Nicholas Zinzendorf, nor the truth among the Brethren and their testimony of the oneness of believers. On the one hand, God’s work always touches its present generation. On the other hand, all His work is eternal and has eternal value.

The work of God’s hand upon the nation of Israel is far more divine and heavenly than we may think. Paul had such a heavenly view of the Israelites because he saw the work of God among them. Though the Israelites killed the prophets (Rom. 11:3), were disobedient and obstinate (Rom. 10:21), and crucified the Lord Jesus on the cross—denying the Holy One and killing the Prince of life (Acts 3:14–15), Paul also saw many divine things about them. He saw the sonship and glory; the covenants and giving of the Law; the service and

promises; the fathers; and the Christ, who came from them according to the flesh.

Oh, that we could have eyes like Paul! Many do not realize that God has even gained many people in Catholicism. God gained Madame Guyon, Brothers Lawrence & Fenelon, and many other spiritual brothers and sisters. Those who are saved and know God in Catholicism are truly lovely and valuable. We do not stand with the fallen aspect of the Catholic Church, yet we should appreciate what is divine and heavenly among them.

A Story of Elijah

At the time of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, Elijah accused the Israelites before God, saying, “The sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away” (1 Kings 19:14). God answered him, “Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal” (v. 18, NKJV®). Even though Elijah was so thoroughly disappointed with the Israelites, God had still reserved seven thousand people in their midst for His own sake.

Seven thousand is a very meaningful number here. Seven is three plus four, three being a number typifying God, and four a number typifying man. Thus, seven could mean God and man together. In other words, this group is made up of people who are “God and man.” They had been gained by God and had satisfied God, even a thousand fold!

Yet, such ones may not always be so obvious to us today. Those who preach well to our ears may only be sounding brass or clanging cymbals (1 Cor. 13:1). The ones who do not bend their knees to Baal tend to be those who love the Lord in simplicity, quietly following Him and sacrificing everything for the brothers and sisters around them.

God's work is wonderful, divine, and heavenly. We should learn to recognize it and appreciate it. May those who have spiritual understanding, discernment, and an eager yet simple heart toward the Lord have this prayer: "Lord, please have mercy on us. We do not know how to appreciate Your work. Show us how wonderful, divine, and heavenly Your work truly is! Bring us to praise You for the work of Your hand upon Your people. You are above all things, the One who deserves to be praised forever. Amen!"

The Sonship and Glory

Who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, ⁵whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

—Romans 9:4–5

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used in Romans 9:4 for “adoption as sons,” *huiiothesia*, is the same word as used in Romans 8:15: “you have received a spirit of adoption as sons.” It literally means, “the placing as a son,” and can be translated “sonship” (Strong, #5206). Israel is often represented as the Lord’s son or first-born among all other nations and peoples (Exo. 4:22; Hos. 11:1). Their relation to the Lord as their Father can also be seen in Deuteronomy 14:1, 32:6, and Isaiah 1:2.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Looking at Romans 9:4–5, we can say that God’s work upon Israel had at least five aspects:

1. The sonship and the glory
2. The covenants and the giving of the Law
3. The temple service and promises
4. The fathers
5. The Christ

These five aspects are not small things! The Israelites have a fallen condition, but they have a divine quality as well. This divine quality includes all the things mentioned by Paul in these two verses.

The Link between Sonship and Glory

Some may wonder why the first aspect would include both sonship and glory together. These could be considered as two different things, but they are also closely related, because full sonship is the glory. Hebrews 2:10 says, “For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.” God is bringing many sons to glory. We will enter glory one day, and that entrance will be the fullness of our sonship.

The day we enter into glory, we will not only fully obtain our sonship, but this sonship will be fully realized within us. The foretaste of this sonship makes our Christian life glorious. Even if we are not fully mature, even if we are not spiritually rich, and even if our operation is very limited, we have all had a foretaste of our sonship through the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13–14). One day we will fully obtain this glorious sonship. Knowing this should fill us with a feeling of glory!

We can taste this glory in Paul’s writing here. Concerning the Israelites, he first mentions their adoption, or sonship. Paul immediately follows this with “the glory.” He must have felt very excited. He almost seems to be proclaiming, “Glory! Glory! How glorious is the sonship obtained by Israel!”

The Meaning of Sonship

When God sent Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, the first thing Moses was commanded to tell Pharaoh in the Lord's name was, "Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Exo. 4:22). This showed the sonship. By bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, God wanted to sanctify a people unto Himself and gain them as His sons. Sonship does not indicate a child but a son with a mature life and the ability to operate in one accord with God (see Gal. 4:1-7).

The Bible is clear that God is not satisfied with only the nation of Israel. In fact, His desire and economy is to obtain many sons in His divine life. This is clear in Romans 8: we have received the Spirit of sonship (v. 15), and now we, all creation, and the Spirit of God all groan together for the full adoption and revelation of God's sons (vv. 19, 23, 26). The very purpose of God calling us is to gain us as sons and for us to obtain this sonship.

How can we know if we have obtained this sonship? First, the triune God must become our life and bring us into this sonship. Second, we must realize that the divine life is growing within us. In this process of growth, God constitutes us with truth, allowing us to become more mature in life. This maturity, based on truth, is necessary so that we can work with God, walk with Him, and accomplish His will. This is the reality of sonship. Once we have obtained the divine life, allowed this life to grow healthily in us, and are richly equipped with truth, then we will not only be mature in life and rich in revelation but also able to operate and work with God.

What Satisfies God

Ephesians 1:5 says, "Having predestined us to adoption as sons (sonship) by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (NKJV®). Notice here that God

did not predestine us to have eternal life but to be adopted as His sons. This is God's pleasure and satisfaction. If the divine life within us does not grow, mature, or become rich, then we have not yet been brought into full sonship, and God is not satisfied. If we cannot live by revelation and vision, God is not satisfied. If we cannot be one with God in living, commitment, and operation, God still is not satisfied. What truly satisfies God is our growth, our maturity as sons, and an operation as sons in one accord with God.

The Covenants and the Giving of the Law

Who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, ⁵whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

—Romans 9:4–5

WORD STUDY

The Greek word for “covenant,” *diathēkē*, primarily signifies “a disposition of property by [legal] will or otherwise.” It can be thought of as an agreement, promise, or understanding, whether human or divine, though here in Romans it refers to promises and undertakings on the part of God (Vine, 135). Paul uses the plural form in this verse, *diathēkai*, indicating multiple covenants. It is very likely Paul had “in mind God’s covenant with Abraham, with Israel through Moses, and with David” (Rogers, 332–333).

The phrase “giving of the Law” comes from the Greek word *nomothesia*. It implies not only the act of giving the Law but also the Law itself given to the people on Mt. Sinai through Moses (Alford, 2:404). Thus, it is not only the act of giving but also a reference to the substance of the Law (Vincent, 3:101).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The first aspect of God's work upon the Israelites was their sonship unto glory. The second aspect involved both the covenants and the giving of the Law. These are grouped together because the giving of the Law is included in the broader category of "covenants." In the Old Testament, there were three major covenants that belonged to the Israelites: the covenant God made with Abraham, the covenant He made through Moses, and the covenant He made with David. The second covenant, made through Moses, included the giving of the Law.

The Covenant with Abraham

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to him and made a covenant, saying, "I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly" (Gen. 17:2). The focus of this covenant was Abraham's seed, as is clear by God's further word to him: "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you" (v. 7). The word used here for "descendants" is literally translated "seed" (Strong, #2233).

God also told Abraham, "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing" (12:2). Thus, we can say overall that the content of God's covenant with Abraham included the multiplied seed, the great nation, the great name, and the great blessing.

In our experience, these promises are what almost everyone desires when they begin to follow the Lord. Almost everyone who loves the Lord hopes to have spiritual seed, to become a great nation, to have a great name, and to obtain a great

blessing. Without beginning with such desire, it becomes hard to walk far down the path of following the Lord. A person who truly follows the Lord will say in the beginning, “Lord, it is wonderful that I will not only have many spiritual children but will also become a great nation, have a great name, and have a great blessing. With all of these things for me, what else in the world is better than following You?”

Once we begin to follow the Lord, we will gradually come to know what these four things actually are. Paul was very clear in Galatians about who this seed was and to whom the promises were made. He said, “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ” (Gal. 3:16). Eventually, we will realize that the seed is Christ, the great nation is Christ, the great name is Christ, and the great blessing is Christ. These aspects are all promises in the covenant God made with Abraham.

The Covenant with Israel through Moses

God’s work did not end with Abraham. After the children of Israel were brought out of Egypt, God gave them the Law through Moses and made a covenant with them. He said, “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exo. 19:5–6).

This covenant not only included many promises but also set forth the Law, which was the content of this covenant and revealed who God is. In fact, the first two commandments of the Law were very much God-centered. The first was that the Israelites should have no other gods but the Lord (20:3), and the second was that they should not make any idols to worship (v. 4). This shows us that God Himself was the very center of the Law.

Because God is the center of the Law, all the commandments represent who He is. Consider, for example, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (v. 16). This shows us that God, who is absolutely holy and righteous, will never bear false witness. Again, the Law says, “You shall not steal” (v. 15). This tells us that God will never steal from us. We may sometimes feel that God has stolen from us, and we may tell Him, “Lord, You are not fair!” But God did not steal from Abraham, and He does not steal from us. God had made promises to Abraham, and He could not steal them back. In His truthfulness, God must accomplish His promise. He is trustworthy, so according to who He is, His word is secure and His covenant will be accomplished.

God’s desire in giving the Law was to manifest Himself through it. He wanted people to see what kind of God He is and what His nature is. He also wanted people to understand the principles of His operation. Through the Law, we can see that God’s manifestation is light, His essence is love, His nature is holiness, and His operation is entirely accomplished according to righteousness. If we see this picture today, we will inwardly rejoice and praise God for His covenants and Law!

The Covenant with David

Hundreds of years after His covenant through Moses, God also made a covenant with David. God promised David that his son would build a temple for God, saying, “When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:12–13). On the one hand, David’s son Solomon did build the temple. On the other hand, the reality of the promised descendant is Christ, who

is the greater Solomon (Matt. 12:42). Thus, the reality of the building of the temple is fulfilled in Christ. The covenant God made with David indicates that God's entire economy is accomplished through Christ.

The Covenants and God's Economy

When Paul considered God's history with the nation of Israel, he did not see one covenant alone but a number of covenants. God made covenants with Abraham, with the Israelites, and with David. Together, these three form the major portion of God's covenants. The covenant God made with Abraham shows us what was on God's heart and His economy to accomplish this desire. The covenant He made with the Israelites through Moses shows us the content of this economy, as well as His essence of love. The covenant He made with David shows us that His economy is accomplished by Christ alone. Another way to say this is that Abraham's covenant is like a picture, the Israelites' covenant is like the content of that picture, and David's covenant is the reality of that content in Christ.

The Assurance the Law Provides

Why did Paul mention the covenants and the giving of the Law side by side? It is because the Law, which reveals to us who God is, also provides the assurance of the covenants. If we only had the covenants without the Law, they would be like a letter of intent regarding a contract—it shows intent, but provides no guarantee. Even in our human lives, a letter of intent has no assurance behind it unless we trust the person writing it. The covenant God made with Abraham included the seed, the great nation, the great name, and the great blessing. However, without knowing the person behind

the covenant, no assurance would accompany these promises. The real value of the covenants lies in God Himself. Because of who God is, we have assurance regarding the covenants He has promised. Since we know who God is through the Law, we know that His promises will not fail.

The Service and the Promises

Who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, ⁵whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

—Romans 9:4–5

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used in Romans 9:4 for “temple service,” *latreia*, comes from the Greek verb *latreuō*, which means “to minister to God” and can be translated “serve, do the service, worship, worshiper” (Strong, #3000). *Latreia* literally means “ministration of God, i.e. worship” (Strong, #2999). In regard to the nation of Israel, this was a reference to all the Levitical and priestly services instituted by the Law (Vincent, 3:101).

In verse 4, the Greek word translated “promises” is *epangeliai*, the plural form of *epangelia*. *Epangelia* literally means “an announcement;” the idea of “promise” comes from the word being used especially as a divine assurance of good (Strong, #1860). This could include not only the promise of a coming Redeemer (Alford, 2:404) but also promises such as the land and blessing in God’s covenant with Abraham (Rogers, 333).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The temple service, or service to God, was closely related to God's promises in the Old Testament. Their proximity to each other in this verse shows that the realization of God's promises was not only through the covenants and Law but also through the priestly service. Similarly today, the promises of God become our enjoyment and reality first through the covenants and Law, and then through service. Even though we enjoy the covenants and all the things found in the Law, we still must have a serving life for us to realize all of God's promises. Without any service, we will have little reality of the promises.

Promises Realized through Service

For the children of Israel, service was mostly related to the temple and to the priesthood. God promised the Israelites that they would become His people, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exo. 19:5–6). Yet, they could not become a kingdom or a holy nation without the establishment of the priesthood. It was when the tabernacle was raised up and the Levitical and priestly service was set up that the kingdom was finally manifested.

God's promises are realized through service, and for the Israelites, this service was the priesthood. It is no different in the church today. No matter how many promises and blessings God has given us, we only realize them through service. Once a proper system of service is established, the blessing promised by God will be manifested. Do not look down on service within the church. Only through service can God's promises be fully realized! Without service in the church, there will be a lack of the reality of God's blessings.

For example, the Lord may give us eloquence and a strong spirit to speak for Him, but if we do not open our mouth, this

gift is empty. However, we can serve God by our speaking. If we stand up to practice speaking for Him, all His gifts to us, all His promises, and all His rich visions and revelations in us will be realized through our service.

Every local church needs some saints to dedicate themselves to service. Surely, Satan was dealt a defeat when the tabernacle was raised up and the Levitical service was established. If there are a few saints in the church who together can pray, fast, read the Bible, pursue Christ, look unto the Lord, plan, and practically manage things in the Lord's presence, then even the earth would shake. Once a system of service is produced, the promises God has given to the church will be realized.

The Realization of God's Riches

In verse 4, Paul began a list of the riches that belonged to Israel, starting with the sonship, and then the glory, covenants, giving of the Law, and promises. It is not only the promises that are realized in service, but also all of these riches! God wants us to fully gain our sonship, yet our growth unto sonship must be through service. Even the realization of the covenants between God and man comes through service.

What Paul saw is really glorious! He seemed to be saying, "As soon as I think of the Israelites, I think of all that is theirs. Without them, there would be no priesthood. Without them, there would be no tabernacle, no sanctuary, and no Holy of Holies. Without them, there would be no ark of the covenant, and without them, God would not have gained His testimony on earth. Praise the Lord that through the service of these people, there was a manifestation of the sonship, covenants, giving of the Law, and promises!"

Because service is the key to the realization of all these elements, there should not be any idle person in the church. Especially regarding service, we should not look to escape.

I have heard so many excuses from people trying to escape serving, from physical soreness to poor weather. So few understand that there is no realization of God's promises without service. If there is no realization of God's promises, there is no realization of the Law, the covenants, and sonship. In other words, the realization of the covenants, Law, and promises all begin with our service!

Spiritual Ecology

Our spiritual service is very much related to our environment. We could talk about this as spiritual ecology—how our spiritual life and service is connected to our surrounding environment. Before our ministry is formed, manifested, or matured, our service has much to do with our church environment. What we learn is unique to the setting we are in because different places require different kinds of serving. To accept this is to accept God's sovereign placement of us as members of the body (1 Cor. 12:18).

People with spiritual vision will stay in one place and learn to serve well there. Such a decision allows their ministry to develop. If there is no opportunity to serve in their local church, they should move to another city to have an opportunity. This is not to encourage people to move for the sake of moving, but to stress the importance of serving. We should stay in one place to learn to serve, and then stay because our service is such a blessing to the church.

Led by the Living God

Because service is so related to God's promises, true service can never be apart from them. In Greek, the root word for "promises" is *agō*, which means "to lead" (Strong, #71). Because this is the root of "promises," we can say that true,

healthy, and effective service that realizes God's promises is related to Him and to His leading.

Life and leading are closely connected. Because God is living, He is able to lead us. By following His leading, we can know that God is living. Our living God is not dormant or stagnant. He has a living leading and He can lead us in all things! We may have been asked before, "How has the Lord led you recently?" If the Lord's leading is not clear to us, it may mean that He is not so alive to us right now. If we know Him as the living Lord, His leading of us will be alive and fresh.

When we are led in a living way, spiritual things come alive to us. Christ, the gospel, the promises, and our service all take on a new dimension of "living." This is the base of all service. We can serve God in many ways, but the foundation of all our service involves knowing the living Christ, actively living Christ out, and proclaiming the living Christ. A living service is both true service for God and the way by which His promises become realized. May our Lord be so alive to us, and may our service truly match His living leading!

The Fathers and the Christ

Who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, ⁵whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

—Romans 9:4–5

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used in verse 5 for “fathers,” *pateres*, is the plural form of *patēr*, meaning a literal or figurative father or parent (Strong, #3962). This is not a reference to God as our Father but to the many previous men and generations. At the very least, it refers to the three patriarchs of the nation of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This Greek word is also used by Stephen in a much broader sense (Acts 7:11–12, 38–39, 44). Even Paul used this word broadly when addressing a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:17). It may refer to any or all of the previous generations of Israelites (Alford, 2:404).

Paul also felt compelled to point out that the Christ, according to the flesh, came from the Israelites. The phrase “according to the flesh” could also be translated “as far as

regards the flesh.” It implies that Christ was not entirely from the Israelites. He also had another nature—the nature of God. We can say, however, that as far as His humanity was concerned, Christ was born from the nation of Israel (Vincent, 3:101).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The Fathers

In verse 4, Paul brought out so many glorious things that belonged to the nation of Israel. He begins verse 5 with “fathers,” which shows us that he completely understood God’s sovereignty and had a broad appreciation for God’s economy. He seemed to say, “Though the Israelites I face today have failed and fallen, I can still see the glorious and wonderful work of God among them. I honor this work. Even the fathers are theirs!”

Like the Israelites, we who are in Christ should have fathers. We are not orphans, nor should we profess that we are fatherless. Many people deny the service and leading of brothers from the past. These people gradually become fatherless. Be careful! It is very easy for us to fall into this! When we say today that the apostles Paul, Peter, and John are all our fathers, we should feel close to them. If the Israelites can stand and testify, “We are the children of Abraham,” we should have an even stronger testimony of the many fathers who begot us, fed us, and raised us up. Brothers and sisters, we have fathers!

It is a rich blessing to have fathers. Do not say, “I have received visions and revelations, yet I have no father.” Even those who can read the Bible with light, give a touching message, unveil rich truth, and speak it with fresh utterance must respect their source. They still need to say, “I have fathers. This is my glory!”

Paul had a very broad vision concerning God's economy, and in this economy, he saw the fathers of the Israelites. This matter of recognizing one's source was important to Paul. He told Timothy, "You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them" (2 Tim. 3:14). We too have fathers, and we must know from whom we have learned. We have gained many riches from Martin Luther and the Plymouth Brethren. We have also gained many riches from saints who loved the Lord in simple ways, both in the course of history and in our own lifetimes. We have fathers, we know who begot us, and we also know who helped us and taught us. This is a precious thing.

The Christ

The Israelites had fathers, and it was from them that Christ came according to the flesh. Not only do we have fathers, we have Christ! Who is Christ? Romans 9:4–5 says Christ is God Himself, the One who is over all. God's work is done completely in and through Christ, and it is only in Christ that God's economy is fully accomplished.

The fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ (Col. 2:9). Christ is the master craftsman of God's eternal plan (Prov. 8:30). God's purpose is achieved in Christ (Eph. 1:9–10). God Himself is manifested through Christ (Heb. 1:3). Without Christ, God would be hidden, His plan would not exist, and His economy would not be accomplished. Without Christ, the radiance of God's glory would never shine (v. 3). It was this Christ, who is over all things, the eternally blessed God, who came out of the nation of Israel. This was a glorious blessing for the Israelites and is a glorious blessing today for us who have this Christ making His home in our hearts.

The Israelites have fathers—from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses, Joshua, and even David. For many generations, the

nation of Israel was the only testimony of God on the earth. Christ was eventually brought in through Israel and became the realization and enlargement of that testimony of God. On the one hand, according to flesh, Christ came out from them; on the other hand, this Christ is also the Son of God. He is the realization of God's being, His heart, and His work. Oh, what a marvelous and glorious Christ we have today!

The Word of God Does Not Fail

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; ⁷nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac your descendants will be named." ⁸That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. ⁹For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son."

—Romans 9:6–9

WORD STUDY

Paul begins Romans 9:6–9 with the statement that “it is not as though the word of God has failed.” The word “failed” is translated from the Greek word *ekpeptōken*, which is composed of two words: *ek*, meaning “out” (Strong, #1537), and *petō*, meaning “to fall” (Strong, #4098). Thus, *ekpeptōken* literally means “to fall out,” though it can also be translated “fail” and “taken none effect” (Strong, #1601). In other words, the current exclusion of Israel from the promised salvation, which seemed theirs by inheritance, does not mean God’s words or promises have failed. The continuation of the verse clarifies why this is—not everyone who is of the physical nation of Israel is Israel according to the promise (Alford, 2:405). Verses

7–9 prove this fact by using the example of Abraham’s two sons (though they are not both named), Ishmael and Isaac (Vincent, 3:138). Ishmael was Abraham’s child in a physical and fleshly sense, but Isaac was Abraham’s child according to God’s promise. The contrast between the two sons can be seen in Genesis 17:15–22 and Galatians 4:22–31.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

God’s sovereignty is the overall theme throughout Romans chapters 9–11, and Paul emphatically begins to expound upon it in 9:6. In this exposition, Paul stresses the fact that this sovereignty is God’s. Even when Paul mentions Christ in verse 5, he focuses on the fact that Christ is the eternally blessed God. To the end of chapter 9, Paul does not mention the name Christ again. Instead, he repeatedly mentions God—eight times overall in this passage of chapter 9 (vv. 6, 8, 11, 14, 16, 20, 22, 26)! Clearly, Paul was emphasizing God, who is not only sovereign but who has an economy in His divine sovereignty. In other words, all of God’s work is related to His sovereignty.

All of chapter 9 emphasizes the sovereignty of God. The whole universe, down to each individual, operates under God’s sovereignty. The enforcement of God’s salvation is also under His sovereignty. It is crucial to understand this matter, but for us to reach such an understanding, we must first know the sovereign God Himself. There is not simply a sovereignty over the entire universe; there is a God who is sovereign over all.

Knowing the Sovereign God and His Sovereignty

Much of our Christian walk is determined by how much we recognize God’s sovereignty, and the extent to which we

recognize God's sovereignty is related to how much we know the sovereign God Himself. If we stress either of these without the other, however, we will come short of a proper recognition of God's sovereignty over our life. If we only consider God's sovereignty and do not know God Himself, we will be full of murmurings. We will wonder why an abstract authority measures out certain things to us. However, it is also possible to focus on God Himself without recognizing His divine sovereignty.

Those who desire to follow the Lord must understand the difference between knowing God Himself and knowing His sovereignty. It is not only God's sovereignty but God Himself who is involved in every situation. If we understand this, we will experience an unexplainable peace concerning all He has arranged. God's sovereign arrangement is not apart from Him. Such experience and understanding leads us to tell Him, "Lord, thank You for being my Lord in all things. You truly are the sovereign God." The more we enjoy and experience God, the more able we will be to apply and be subject to God's sovereignty. The more we know our sovereign God, the more God's sovereignty will be manifested in us for others to see.

The Unfailing Word of God

Romans 9:6 begins, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." With the case of the Israelite nation before him, how could Paul say that the word of God did not fail? It was because he knew the sovereign God! He could confidently trust the word of God because he saw how God manifests Himself through His word.

Consider the example of a young woman who wanted to travel to a country that was considered dangerous. Her father warned her not to go. As head of the family, the father had the authority to stop his daughter from traveling. Yet the

words of the father carried with them his great care for his daughter. The love and care so evident in his words enabled his daughter to listen to him and heed his warning. She canceled her trip not merely because of his sovereign command but also because his love was conveyed in his words. Similarly, because the sovereign God is manifested to us through His word, we can be sure His word will never fail or fall.

In verse 7, the word “descendants,” which can be literally translated “seed” (Strong, #4690), is used twice. This is an indication of something full of the vitality of life and the ability to dispense life. A seed is full of the elements of life and is the means by which life reproduces itself. In principle, God’s work is to dispense Himself into us by sowing His divine life and nature into us.

Finally, verses 8 and 9 mention the children of promise and God’s word of the promise. His word does not fail. His chosen seed becomes the promised children, testifying that He, with His purpose, plan, and economy, is the sovereign God over all.

God's Purpose according to His Choice (1)

And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; ¹¹for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, ¹²it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

—Romans 9:10–13

WORD STUDY

In Romans 9:10–13, an important phrase occurs in verse 11: “so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand.” The word “according to” comes from the Greek word *kata*, which means “in accordance with, corresponding to” (Wallace, 742). God’s purpose (*prothesis*), therefore, is in accordance with His choice (*eklogēn*). In other words, His purpose extends as far as His choice does. This indicates that God’s purpose is not founded upon right or merit but upon God’s choice or election (Vincent, 3:103).

God’s purpose does not stand based on the untrustworthy works of man, but rather on His sovereign election. The Greek word used here for “stand,” *menē*, means “to remain,

to abide.” In reference to a place, it means to not depart—not to leave, but to continue to be present. In reference to time, it means to continue to be—not to perish, but to last and stand (Thayer, 399). God’s purpose is here treated as one throughout all time, a purpose that, if thwarted even once, would be nullified (Alford, 2:407).

Taking all of these elements together, we could say the following: God has a sovereign will, and according to His will, He made a choice. His choice was made according to His own will so that His purpose might remain intact and stand, determined not by merit or descent, but by His sovereign pleasure (Vincent, 3:138). For further discussion regarding the words “purpose” and “choice,” see the Word Study of chapter 144.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In Romans 9–11, two main things are emphasized: the sovereignty of God and His sovereign economy. Concerning the sovereignty of God, there are five aspects:

1. It is related to the purpose of God according to His choice (9:5–13).
2. It is the base of His mercy (9:14–18).
3. It is the base of His authority (9:19–29).
4. It is manifested in the righteousness that is by faith (9:30–10:3).
5. It is displayed through Christ (10:4–21).

The first of these points will be covered here and the next chapter, and the remainder will be explored in subsequent chapters.

God’s Word, His Work, and His Sovereignty

Romans 9:6 says, “But it is not as though the word of God

has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." God's word cannot fail because God Himself is sovereign. In His sovereignty, He will never allow His purpose according to His choice to fail or fall. By knowing God's word, we come to know the sovereign God Himself because He manifests Himself through His word. By understanding the matter of God's choice, we come to see more of the sovereignty of God. On the one hand, all of God's work in us is based on how much we are related to God Himself and to His word. On the other hand, all the work is totally related to His sovereignty.

When we consider God Himself, we should consider the certainty of His word. When we consider His sovereignty, we should consider how His purpose according to His choice stands firm in Christ. This is why Romans 9:7 says, "Nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: 'through Isaac your descendants will be named.'" Abraham had eight sons (Gen. 16:15, 21:3, 25:2), yet only Isaac counted in God's eyes. The other seven did not count, not only because God is sovereign, but also because He had a selection in His sovereignty.

Grace in God's Sovereignty and Promises

Using the example of Isaac and Ishmael, Paul told us in Romans 9:8 that the children of the flesh are not children of God. Rather, it is the children of the promise who are counted as the seed. In our experience, our first birth from our mother's womb makes us "children of the flesh." We are not "children of the promise" until our second birth, which is our regeneration through water and Spirit (John 3:5). The word of promise was recounted in Romans 9:9: that when God came, Sarah would have a son. In other words, the grace we receive in God's sovereignty is freely given to us in His promises.

How are some Christians able to follow the Lord even after decades of frustration? They would point entirely to God's grace, mercy, and compassion and say, "I am only a little child receiving God's promises. The sovereign God is the One who preserves me in the church and among the saints. This process is not easy, but God is sovereign, and His sovereignty has always proven greater than my difficult environments. Under His sovereignty, He operates in difficult times to reveal His glory more and more."

That His Purpose Would Stand

In Romans 9:10–13, Paul uses the example of Jacob and Esau. This passage has a surprising word by God: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." We may wonder why God loved and chose Jacob, and why the "older will serve the younger" (Rom. 9:12). The reason given is "so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand" (v. 11). The word "stand" can also be translated "abide." It is God's absolute sovereignty that causes His purpose according to His choice to stand and abide.

From the narrative in Genesis, we know that Jacob snatched the birthright of the firstborn from his older brother, Esau (Gen. 25:31–34), and that he gained the blessing of the firstborn birthright by deceiving his father, Isaac (27:22–35). However, under God's sovereignty, it seems that all the material riches of Isaac were eventually given to Esau, and Jacob did not obtain any of his father's possessions!

Yet, didn't Jacob want the birthright and blessing of the firstborn? Didn't this include the inheritance from his father? Eventually, what he obtained was not physical but spiritual. God seemed to say, "Jacob is My beloved. The portion I will give him is not physical but spiritual, not earthy but heavenly, unseen by men, not valuable in people's eyes, but precious in My eyes." Under God's sovereignty, Jacob gained all the

spiritual blessings. Truly, God's word did not fail: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Rom. 9:13). This was the operation of God's sovereignty for His eternal will to be accomplished.

God's Purpose according to His Choice (2)

And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; ¹¹for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, ¹²it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

—Romans 9:10–13

WORD STUDY

For discussion regarding the phrase, “so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand,” see chapter 143.

In Romans 9:11, the word “choice” comes from the Greek word *eklogē*, which can also be translated “selection, election” (Strong, #1589). It is used as a noun but denotes the act of picking out or choosing (Thayer, 197). To the Greeks, this word indicated choosing or selecting in favor of one of many possibilities and rejecting the others. Such a choice came only after viewing the possibilities from many angles with a concern for selecting the best. Additionally, the word stresses the element of freedom in the choice. Thus, *eklogē* here lays emphasis not only on the careful attention of God

to His choosing, but also on His freedom to choose however He desires (Kittel, 4:148–149, 179).

The word “purpose” comes from the Greek word *prothesis*, which in turn comes from the Greek word *protithemai*, composed of *pro*, meaning “before, prior” (Strong, #4253), and *tithēmai*, meaning, “to set, put, place” (Thayer, 622). Together, they indicate a “placing before oneself” (Strong, #4388). *Prothesis* is also found twice in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose (prothesis) who works all things after the counsel of His will. (Eph. 1:11)

This was in accordance with the eternal purpose (prothesis) which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph. 3:11)

In both verses in Ephesians, *prothesis* is related to what God established even before time itself. It is His eternal purpose. This could also be the inference here in Romans 9 (Alford, 2:407).

Revelation and Application

As we consider the verses of Romans 9, we have to conclude that Paul’s understanding of divine sovereignty stretched far beyond our own. Verse 11 shows us that people do both good and bad things. In other words, people are not born good or bad but do good or bad things. Yet, even this doing is under God’s sovereignty. It was under God’s sovereignty that Esau and Jacob, the children in verse 11, were born, and all the good and bad things that followed were also under God’s sovereignty. In God’s eyes, it is not an issue of victory or failure, of strength or weakness, or of good or bad, for all of these are under His sovereignty. For this reason, the emphasis of verse 11 is not good or bad but the matters of purpose, choice, and standing.

God's Choice

The Greek word used for “choice” denotes a careful and attentive searching, and a choosing with a strong feeling of favor. Consider a simple example of a woman who would like to buy a dress. She may favor some dress stores and not others. She will not spend time searching for a dress in the stores she does not favor. In the right store, the woman may favor a certain dress material, so she will make a careful comparison of colors among all the dresses of that material. After choosing a color, she will more carefully compare all the dresses of the same material and color. Eventually, one will match her desire, and she will choose it and buy it.

Have we ever considered God's sovereign choice in this way? When we truly understand God's choosing, we will be brought to a profound appreciation of how sovereign and almighty God is. He has His purpose, and whoever resists Him is, in reality, disobeying His authority.

Watchman Nee wrote a hymn that reads, in part, “Yet You are God! Oh, how can You give way? Please, Lord, do not give in; wait 'til I obey.” The God who chooses people is sovereign, will never give way, and should never be treated with indifference. Yet His choosing is not cold—He does not choose people to simply get a job done. When God chooses, He is full of feeling and emotion—“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” When He sovereignly chooses a person, He searches and chooses carefully with strong favor and has strong feeling about His choice.

Firmly Standing

The Greek word for “stand” in verse 11 is *menē*. In the apostle John's writings, this same word is frequently translated “abide.” Here, however, the emphasis is on the firmness and constancy of the abiding. This is not a word that addresses

doing something, whether with our hearts or with hard decisions; rather, it is related to a certain kind of existence.

This gives us insight into how God chooses people. First, God loves the world (John 3:16). He favors people! Based on this favor, He comes to search, choose carefully, and pick up many people. Furthermore, the purpose of God's choice is firm. This firmness is related to God's existence—as firm as God is, so is His choosing, and this choice “stands.” God dwells, abides, and remains in His choice.

This means that we can be filled with lifelong confidence as we follow the Lord. Because God has chosen us, He can never regret it! God cannot say to an old Christian, “I searched and carefully chose you thirty years ago, yet I cannot believe you are so disappointing thirty years later. Forget it! I will give you up!” This will never happen because God abides in His choice. God would rather say, “I am responsible for My choice. If you match My desire and accomplish what is on My heart, remember that I chose you. If you do not match My desire and cannot reach what is in My heart, remember that I still chose you. My purpose according to My choice is firm. I dwell in My choice and will accomplish My will in My firm selection.”

We should thank the Lord that His purpose according to His choice abides. We should thank Him for the great love and favor He shows mankind in His predestined purpose. In such favor He searched, carefully choosing people, eventually finding us. Furthermore, He makes His purpose, according to His choice, stand and remain, so that we can serve Him lifelong without discouragement.

God's Purpose

What is God's “purpose,” which is according to His choice? The Greek word used here is *prothesis*. The first part of this word, *pro*, means “before” or “ahead of.” The second part of

this word, *tithēmai*, means “to set, establish.” *Prothesis* can be explained as the ordained plan of God before the creation of the world, that is, the counsel of God's will before the creation (Eph. 1:11), and His plan and purpose according to that will.

God's purpose according to His choice in Christ does not match our natural opinion. Our natural man looks down on other people. We discount others. We believe that God is only pleased with us. These feelings can exist between races, social classes, and generations. When we examine our natural opinions, we will see that they do not match God's purpose, plan, or work in the least.

When Paul talked about God's purpose according to His choice, he used the word *prothesis*. The fact that God has a *prothesis* shows that He had a plan before the creation of the world, which included all of His work in time. We also are included in that plan, as are all the saints of previous and future generations.

Not only were we chosen by God in His careful and attentive selection, but every brother and sister we are with has also been chosen by Him. God abides in this choice so that His purpose according to His choice would also abide. This purpose was established even before the creation of the world and will remain strong and constant. Praise God for His firm purpose according to His choosing!

The Mercy and Compassion of God

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! ¹⁵For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” ¹⁶So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

—Romans 9:14–16

WORD STUDY

Though their meanings are very similar, two different Greek words are used for “mercy” and “compassion” in Romans 9:15—*eleeō* (mercy) and *oikteirō* (compassion). *Eleēō* literally means to show compassion or mercy, either in word or in deed (Strong, #1653). *Oikteirō* means to have compassion on, or to exercise pity toward (Strong, #3627). In general, *eleeō* implies a seeking to help someone in need, while *oikteirō* emphasizes being moved inwardly (Rogers, 333). “Mercy” could emphasize God’s dealing with people in their wretched nature. “Compassion” could emphasize God’s inward feeling, a feeling that in people would be expressed by sighing and tears (Vincent, 3:104).

Verse 16 contains the phrase, “the man who wills or the man who runs.” The Greek word for “wills,” *thelontos*, can

also be translated “desires,” with the thought of determination, choice, and preference (Strong, #2309). The Greek word for “runs,” *trechō*, denotes strenuous effort by a participant in a foot race (Thayer, 630). The genitive case of both words could indicate “genitive of a word (“mercy”) to be supplied or it could be genitive of source” (Rogers, 333). In other words, the construction of this phrase could indicate that God’s mercy and compassion are the supply of any desire on the part of man, or it could indicate that the totality of man’s strenuous effort is never the source of God’s mercy and compassion (Rogers, 333).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

As mentioned in chapter 143, in Romans 9–11, Paul deals with five aspects of God’s sovereignty. Romans 9:14–18 deals with the second of these aspects, which is that God’s sovereignty is the base for His mercy.

Romans 9:15 restates God’s word to Moses: He will have mercy and compassion on whomever He wills. Only two verses before, in verse 13, Paul quoted what God said: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” The nearness of these two verses to each other shows that the reason God sovereignly chose Jacob was not because He was being unfair but because of the mercy and grace He exercises in His sovereignty.

Though similar, mercy and compassion are two different things in Greek. Mercy is related to outward actions, and compassion is related to inward feeling. If there is mercy without compassion, there will only be cold actions. If there is compassion without mercy, no action will be taken to give help. However, in His mercy, our God shows us His actions of grace, and in His compassion, He displays how full He is of love, sympathy, understanding, and feeling.

God's Mercy and Compassion

God is full of both mercy and compassion. He not only has mercy on us by His actions, but is also full of the feeling of compassion toward us. We sometimes pray to God, "Lord, I am so weak and have failed and offended You. Please forgive me. Please be with me." He will never say to us, "That is totally unreasonable. I have forgiven you so many times; how can you ask for even more forgiveness?" On the contrary, He is full of mercy and compassion each and every time. He is always full of sympathy, full of feeling for us, and full of understanding regarding our need.

Our God is not only a God of mercy but also a God of compassion. He helps us in His mercy, and He dispenses Himself into us in His compassion. Each time we experience His mercy and compassion, we are brought into His rest, His presence, His riches, and His inward heart. Those who are sovereignly chosen by God can ultimately boast only of His mercy and compassion. When Paul described God in his second letter to the Corinthians, he said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (1:3). Our God is the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.

In our daily life, we need both God's mercy and compassion. We need them in the mornings, afternoons, and evenings. We need His mercy and compassion in many different matters and situations. In different stages of human life, we also need different levels of His mercy and compassion.

Depending on God

Verse 16 says, "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." The structure of this verse in Greek shows that God's mercy is the source of any willing and running by His chosen ones, and

even more, that any determination according to their own desire will be in vain. God's sovereignty is the base of His mercy; therefore, all of His mercy is according to His sovereign will. Our God, in His mercy, is the source of our willing and running, yet these are according to His will, not ours.

When young people read this verse, they do not have much feeling. When an old man reads this, he has a lot of feeling. Young men like to will and run, but old men have the feeling, "It does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." Young people run together with their companions, yet few still run together when they grow old. At such a time, they can only say, "God is sovereign. He is full of mercy in His divine sovereignty, and He is also full of compassion as He shows mercy. It does not depend on the one who wills or runs, but on God who has mercy."

God's Governing Will

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” ²⁰On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? ²¹Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

—Romans 9:19–21

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used for God’s “will” in Romans 9:19, *boulēma*, literally means “a resolve” and can also be translated “counsel, purpose” (Strong, #1013; Thayer, 105). It comes from the word *boulomai*, which denotes a willingness, disposition toward, and intent (Strong, #1014). In Acts 20:27, the noun *boulē* is used to indicate “all the contents of the divine plan,” while in Ephesians 1:11 it is used of the counsel of God’s eternal will (Thayer, 104–105).

In verse 21, the Greek word translated “honorable use” is the noun *timē*, which means “honor” and denotes value, esteem, and dignity (Strong, #5092). It is the same word used in Hebrews 2:7 to describe the crowning of the Lord Jesus “with glory and *honor*.”

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

As mentioned in chapter 143, in Romans 9–11, Paul deals with five aspects of God’s sovereignty. Romans 9:19–29 deals with the third of these aspects, which is that God’s sovereignty is the base for His authority.

God’s Government

The end of Romans 9:19 mentions the will of God. This word, “will,” may indicate the resolution of the triune God’s divine counsel (Eph. 1:11). God has resolved something, so who can resist Him? Since God has made a resolution, and since whatever He says counts, who can be against His will? Based on these considerations, Paul writes about God’s governing through Romans 9:29.

God’s sovereignty is the base of His governing, or authority. His will in governing is to gain vessels for honorable use (v. 21). God also wants to demonstrate His wrath and make His power known, so He endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction (v. 22). Furthermore, He wants to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory (v. 23). Finally, even though the Israelites continually disobeyed God, He still has sovereignly left them a seed (v. 29).

Vessels for Honor

In verses 20 and 21, Paul refers to people as clay vessels created by God, the Molder and Potter. These vessels are either for honorable or common use. The Greek word for “honorable use,” *timē*, is actually a noun, so the phrase could be translated “vessels for honor.” We can see in these verses

that God's governing will is to gain vessels for honor. Such vessels can contain and manifest Him.

"Honor" (*timē*) indicates value. After ascending to the heavens, the Lord was crowned with glory and honor (Heb. 2:7). Glory indicates His person, and honor indicates His value. Vessels gained by God for honor have portions in Christ, and in Christ they will eventually share His value.

Honor is related to our value before God, and very practically, our value is related to our time. We should ask ourselves, "How do I use my time?" A person who does not know how to use time well will never be honorable. This is because our lifelong hope is to become valuable vessels for God, that His will could be fulfilled in us through His divine and sovereign governing.

God Endured with Much Patience

What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? ²³And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory. ²⁴even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. ²⁵As He says also in Hosea, “I will call those who were not My people, ‘My people,’ and her who was not beloved, ‘beloved.’” ²⁶“And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, ‘you are not My people,’ there they shall be called sons of the living God.”

—Romans 9:22–26

WORD STUDY

In verse 22, the Greek word translated “willing,” *thelōn*, is the same word used in verse 16 for the “will” of man. This word indicates desire and shows determination, choice, and preference (Strong, #2309). M. R. Vincent remarks that it was not the purpose of God to show His wrath and power, but rather a desire that grew out of His holy character. The position of the word “willing” is not to enhance the idea of His punishment but to contrast with the word “patience.” In other words, though His holy will would lead Him to

show His wrath, He withheld and endured with patience (Vincent, 3:107).

The Greek word used in verse 22 for “endured,” *pherō*, has a wide variety of meanings. It primarily means “to bear, carry, uphold,” but can also mean, “to bring forth” (Strong, #5342). It can be used in the sense of “bearing or bringing forth fruit” (Vine, 52) and is used extensively in John 15 regarding the branches “bearing” fruit in the vine.

The Greek word translated “patience,” *makrothumia*, means “forbearance, patience” (Strong, #3115). It is composed of two Greek words—*macros*, meaning “long (in place [distant] or time)” (Strong, #3117), and *thumos*, literally meaning “passion, as if breathing hard” (Strong, #2372). Here, *makrothumia* could imply that though God has been full of intense feeling for so long, He is slow to avenge any wrongs (Thayer, 387).

Two different Greek words are used in verses 22 and 23 for “prepared”—*katartizō* (v. 22) and *proetoimazō* (v. 23). *Katartizō* literally means “to complete thoroughly” (Strong, #2675), while *proetoimazō* means “to prepare beforehand, to make ready beforehand” (Thayer, 539). The perfect tense used for the “preparation” of vessels of wrath indicates a process leading to a result, a continual reciprocal action between human sin and divine judgment. In other words, God’s wrath upon vessels of wrath is the result of the process of sin in a person’s life. The aorist tense used for the “preparation” of vessels of mercy, however, indicates not a process or result but the preciousness of God’s single act of election (Vincent, 3:107–108).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Paul’s debate in Romans 9:21–26 is hard to understand. God is the Creator (v. 20); He is sovereign and has His government; He is the Potter who has power over the clay and

can make one vessel for honor and from the same lump make another for common use. But even though a potter surely has the authority to make a valuable vase or a common bowl from the same material, why would he destroy the common bowl, since it is still useful? Even more, Paul is actually talking about human beings! Bowls do not have feelings, but human beings do.

Why are we unable to understand what Paul said here? It is because we do not understand God. Because of this, we debate with Him, telling Him what is “right” or “necessary.” We may also say to God, “It may be legal for You to make me a vessel for common use, but it is not reasonable! I am not a bowl but a person with feeling. Clay vessels for common use do not have feelings, but I do, and I do not want to face eternal punishment!” If we want to understand God’s word here, we must know the God who speaks it.

Full of Endurance and Patience

Romans 9:22 indicates that God wanted to show His wrath and make His power known. If the verse ended there, we could say that God is a God of wrath, but the rest of the verse says that He endured with much patience the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. This is hard to understand. If God is of wrath and if the vessels of wrath are prepared for destruction, why would He need endurance and patience? Yet, the facts of this verse show us that He is not only a God of wrath but also a God of much endurance and patience.

This is like an interaction between a judge and a guilty criminal. God is the judge, and we are the guilty criminals. Yet it is as if the judge said, “Your guilt requires the death penalty. According to my judgment, you must die. However, I will let this judgment tarry for as long as possible. I will endure with patience until there is no other way, and will sentence you only then.”

It is with this endurance and patience that God chooses to treat the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. God is full of endurance and patience toward such vessels.

God's Desire

Paul saw God's sovereignty, yet he also saw that God's sovereignty is not apart from God Himself. On the one hand, there are indeed some vessels prepared for destruction; on the other hand, God endures these vessels with patience. If God really desired these vessels to be destroyed, He would have no need of endurance and patience. Yet His person is full of endurance and patience, and He truly does not want these vessels of wrath to be destroyed. Even if some still perish in the end, this is not God's original desire, for we know He desires that all men would be saved and that none would perish (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9).

Paul's example clearly shows us that some people are prepared for destruction. However, God seems to say through this verse, "Even so, how much I desire all men to be saved and no one to perish! I will wait and wait, enduring with patience. If some eventually perish and are destroyed in My divine and sovereign predestination, I can still say that I have always endured and had patience toward them."

With Much Patience

The Greek word for "patience," *makrothumia*, is composed of *macro* and *thumos*. *Macro* means "long" and is related to the Greek word *meGas*, which means "big, great, high" (Strong, #3173). *Thumia* is a strong or fierce feeling and desire. When we hear the word, "patience," we immediately think of a reaction to suffering. Yet the word Paul uses here indicates a feeling. God's patience involves a long, grand feeling.

Parents who have raised children can relate to this grand feeling. Every parent knows that their children will make tens of thousands of mistakes as they grow. But in a healthy situation, parents seldom remember nor take lasting account of their children's mistakes. They will not keep in mind specific mistakes, nor will they hold on to their children's weaknesses, failures, or imperfections. Parents always feel that their children are the best and that they will achieve higher things. This grand feeling is the patience attributed here to God.

God's Endurance

Besides patience, God also exercises endurance. He endured with much patience the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. "To endure" (*pherō*) not only means "carrying" and "bearing" but also "fruit-bearing." This word is used in Hebrews 1:3 regarding the Son of God who is "upholding" all things by the word of His power. When we speak of enduring, we often mean facing a negative situation and persevering. The meaning here includes not only this aspect but also carrying and even bearing fruit. The meaning of God's endurance is very rich. It involves the element of life and is even related to all of God's operation and work in His life and power.

Our God is different from what we may think. We might think that He is a cruel God, doing cruel things with His power and wisdom. We may think He simply made some base vessels prepared for destruction and some valuable vessels prepared for glory. No! Please remember that God desires all men to be saved and not one man to perish.

Toward those vessels prepared for destruction, God is full of endurance and patience. In fact, all people are under God's judgment and headed to destruction, yet His grace and mercy made a way for some to be saved. When it comes to vessels prepared for destruction, on the one hand, we must acknowledge God's sovereignty. On the other hand, God is full of a

grand feeling for these vessels and has endured and borne these vessels with the hope that they might be saved and bear fruit of life.

Two Kinds of Preparation

Verse 22 mentions the vessels of wrath that have been prepared for destruction. The word here for “prepared” can also be translated “to be complete,” as it is used in 2 Corinthians 13:11: “Be made complete!” The perfect tense of this verb shows that this preparation involved a process. The result of this process is the response to sin by the all-powerful and all-wise God—wrath and destruction.

In verse 23, Paul again mentions preparation, this time using the Greek word *proetoimazō*. This word is also used in Ephesians 2:10 to indicate what God, in His eternal will, has prepared beforehand to accomplish His work in us, His vessels. In other words, *proetoimazō* denotes His will to perfectly transform us into His glorious and rich testimony.

Before anything was created, God prepared a very proper destination for believers to reach. This involved three things related to God. First of all, it involved His sovereignty. Verse 25 says, “As He says also in Hosea: I will call those who were not My people, ‘My people.’” Second, it involved divine love. Verse 25 also says, “And her who was not beloved, ‘beloved.’” Third, it involves the dispensing of divine life. Verse 26 says, “And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ there they shall be called sons of the living God.” These short verses unveil God’s sovereignty, love, and the dispensing of His divine life. All of these are for us to manifest His rich glory as vessels who have been shown mercy and have been prepared beforehand for glory.

The Remnant That Will Be Saved

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved; ²⁸For the Lord will execute His word on the earth, thoroughly and quickly.” ²⁹And just as Isaiah foretold, “Unless the Lord of Sabbath had left to us a posterity, we would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah.”

—Romans 9:27–29

WORD STUDY

In Romans 9:27–29, Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah twice, first from Isaiah 10:22–23, then from Isaiah 1:9. The prophecy made in Isaiah 10 and quoted in Romans 9:27–28 was originally spoken regarding the return of the remnant of Israel from Assyrian captivity. Yet Paul uses this prophecy, partially fulfilled in that return, to reference the full and certain salvation of the remnant of Israel in the last days (Alford, 2:413).

The Greek word for “posterity” in verse 29 can also be translated “seed” (Strong, #4690). Martin Luther wrote, “Almost the entire people (of Israel) were carnal and glorified in the flesh—it would not have been surprising had all been cut off. Only the Lord allowed a seed to remain unto Himself.

Here it is accomplished: the promise of God overflowed with righteousness” (Luther, 143–144).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The remnant in verse 27 is the seed left by the Lord, and this seed is a testimony that God’s economy never fails. Even though the Israelites in this verse are only a remnant, they are still very valuable before God.

A Testimony of God’s Unchangeable Will

In Romans 9:25, Paul quoted a prophecy of Hosea that the Gentiles would receive grace. Now in verse 29, he quotes the prophet Isaiah, who spoke of the Israelites receiving grace. Throughout the Biblical record of the nation of Israel, their character indeed seemed like that of Sodom and Gomorrah. They offended God, worshipped idols, committed fornication, and ought to have been burned. Yet, though they were so fallen and far away from God, and though they denied Him so strongly, God still preserved a seed and left a remnant.

On the one hand, Israel was pitiful—even though their number was like the sand of the sea, the saved ones were only a small remnant. On the other hand, no matter how fallen and degraded they were, and no matter how short they came of God’s glory and testimony, God’s will for them was still firm. His calling is irrevocable, and what He has established is forever unchangeable.

What a wonderful remnant! What a remnant worthy of praise! They are not wonderful or praiseworthy because of anything they have done. Rather, this remnant is a testimony of God’s wisdom, eternal will, economy, and His execution of His economy. If God says something, it never changes. If God establishes something, it is unshakable. If

God chooses something, it is forever chosen. Outwardly speaking, it seemed God failed because the Israelites did not testify of Him. Yet from the essential point of view, God is to be praised, because He eventually obtained what He desires. On the one hand, there is only a remnant; on the other hand, this remnant shows that God is trustworthy and worthy to be praised and worshipped.

The Righteousness by Faith

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; ³¹but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. ³²Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone.

—Romans 9:30–32

WORD STUDY

In Romans 9:30, Paul says that the Gentiles have attained righteousness. The Greek word used here for “attained,” *katalambanō*, is composed of two Greek words, *kata* and *lambanō*. *Kata* is a Greek preposition that primarily means “down;” however, in compound words (as in this verse), it frequently denotes intensity, thus creating a stronger sense of the word it is paired with (Strong, #2596). *Lambanō* means “to take or receive;” its pairing with *kata* gives it a more active sense. Thus, *katalambanō* indicates a laying hold of something so as to make it one’s own, and even a “seizing upon” (Thayer, 332, 370–371). This is more striking when considering the context—the Gentiles did not pursue, yet they attained righteousness.

Conversely, Paul describes in verse 31 how the Israelites pursued, yet did not attain to a law of righteousness. The Greek word for “pursuing,” *diōkō*, is the same word used in verse 30 for what the Gentiles did not do. It literally means “to pursue” and by implication can mean “to persecute” (Strong, #1377). The word can either carry the feeling of hostility or not, and can mean “to run swiftly in order to catch some person or thing; to press on, figurative of one who in a race runs swiftly to reach the goal” (Thayer, 153).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

As mentioned in chapter 143, in Romans 9–11, Paul deals with five aspects of God’s sovereignty. Romans 9:30–10:3 deals with the fourth of these aspects, which is that God’s sovereignty is manifested in the righteousness that is by faith.

The Price Paid

In verse 30, the Greek word used for “attained” is the same word Paul used in Philippians 3:12: “lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” In Philippians 3, it is clear that this laying hold of, or attaining, required a price to be paid. It is the same in this verse in Romans. The Gentiles did not pursue righteousness, yet gained it by a price being paid. However, it was Christ, not the Gentiles, who paid the price.

In the process of obtaining righteousness, we did not pay any price. We Gentiles never pursued righteousness. The righteousness we obtained was from Christ, which was obtained and realized by the price He paid. Brothers and sisters, Christ paid a price so that we who never pursued righteousness could obtain the righteousness which is by faith.

The Pursuit of a Law of Righteousness

In verse 31, Paul writes of Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness. The Greek word for “pursue” is the same Paul used in Philippians 3:12 to say, “I press on.” This Greek word can also be translated “to persecute,” as it is in Acts 9:4: “And [Saul] fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’”

Have we ever considered that pursuing is a kind of persecution? Think of when a man is interested in a woman. He will, in a way, persecute her. His phone calls come as soon as the morning dawns, again at lunch time, and again as soon as work is over in the evening. He will spend time with her whenever he has the opportunity. We call this the man’s “pursuit” of the woman, but it is also a persecution! The man would even say, “Whether she likes me or not, I must see her!” This is surely a persecution to the woman.

“Pursuing” and “persecution” are different words in English with different connotations to us, but both point to the same thing. Pursuing is a positive kind of persecution. In this way, there are many kinds of persecutions in the world that are very positive. For example, parents have a positive and healthy persecution of their children. Because they love and care for their children, they “persecute” them. Sometimes children are so bothered or embarrassed by the amount of care their parents have for them that they feel persecuted.

Likewise, children may “persecute” their parents. For example, as parents grow older they may develop health concerns that prevent them from enjoying certain aspects of life. When a father with high blood pressure is stopped by his child from eating unhealthy food, it indeed feels like persecution. Yet this is not persecution the way we think of persecution; it is an intense care out of love. A positive persecution actually indicates a pursuit of something with our whole heart, will, and strength, a pursuing in which all things are laid aside to take possession.

The Israelites pursued a law of righteousness and lived for this righteousness. This pursuing was a kind of persecution that involved their whole person. They pursued the righteousness that is found in the Law of Moses and wanted this righteousness to become the center of their life and testimony. They may have felt that if they could do this, every aspect of their life would be according to God's desire and satisfaction. Unfortunately, in pursuing a law of righteousness, they laid aside the God who gave them the Law. Even if they absolutely pursued the Law in this way, they could not obtain its righteousness because only God Himself is the true, unique, and complete righteousness.

The Attaining of the Righteousness by Faith

We may wonder why the Israelites, who pursued a law of righteousness, were unable to obtain it. They were unable to do so because they did not seek it by faith but by the works of the Law (Rom. 9:32). The Israelites pursued a law of righteousness, but they did not arrive at the Law, because as Romans 10:4 says, "Christ is the end of the law."

The Law itself is only letters that cannot operate. Christ, however, is living, organic, vital, and full of operation. On the one hand, the Law testifies of God; on the other hand, the Law is limited and can only become an outward pattern for people to follow. The Israelites could not attain the righteousness of the Law because they did not seek it by faith but by works. They could not see that the righteousness that comes from God can only be obtained by faith.

"By faith," *ek pisteōs*, literally means "out of faith." *Ek* can mean "out of" or "forth from" a place or group, but can also indicate the origin, source, or cause for something (Thayer, 189–190). The phrase "righteousness by faith" implies that faith is the source of our righteousness. Yet faith also has a source. Faith's origin is Christ (see chapter 44). It is His faith

that resides in us, causing us to believe into Him and obtain righteousness. The faith we obtain is the faith of Christ, and the righteousness we obtain is the righteousness of Christ. The phrase “righteousness by faith” does not mean that we need to grit our teeth and believe. Rather, it means that the faith of Christ operates in us to produce righteousness.

We Gentiles did not pursue righteousness, but we obtained the righteousness of Christ by and through His faith. Even before we ever thought of Christ, God was working to dispense the faith of His Son into us so we could obtain His righteousness.

According to truth, if we do not believe, we cannot be saved (Rom. 10:9). However, most people are saved not because they understand the truth but because there is an unexplainable feeling within them, saying, “I want to believe that the Lord Jesus is my Savior! I cannot give a reason why, but I know that I am a sinner, that Jesus died on the cross for me, and that His blood has cleansed me of every sin.” This is the faith of Christ meeting us, entering into us, and operating in us to cause us to obtain His righteousness—the righteousness which is by faith and faith alone.

The Stone of Stumbling

Just as it is written, “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.”

—Romans 9:33

WORD STUDY

In Romans 9:33, Paul combines two different prophecies made by Isaiah. The first, “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense,” is taken from Isaiah 8:14. The second, “he who believes in Him will not be disappointed,” is taken from Isaiah 28:16. H. Alford writes that Paul had no problem putting them together because both prophecies were interpreted by the Jews as referring to the Messiah (Alford, 2:415–416). Christ is both the stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and He is the one to be believed in.

However, why did Paul feel to combine the two verses? Why did he add the second portion from Isaiah 28:16? Paul quoted the Septuagint version of this verse, which translated the Hebrew as “will not be put to shame.” The original Hebrew, however, could also be translated, “shall not make haste” or “shall not fly in terror” (Alford, 2:415–416). Martin Luther wrote, “This means that he who believes in Christ

need not hurry away or flee, as he will not be terrified. The believer is afraid of nothing, but stands quiet and secure on a firm rock” (Luther, 144).

Thus, while Christ is introduced as a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, He may also be referred to as a rock on which believers can stand.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The Israelites pursued a law of righteousness, yet they did not understand that the end of the law is Christ (Rom. 10:4). They sought to practice the letter of the Law in their behavior, so they stumbled on Christ, who is the stumbling stone. Indeed, Christ is both a stumbling stone and a rock of offense.

The Stone of Stumbling and Rock of Offense

In the Old Testament, Zion was the highest hill on which Jerusalem was built, and the site of the temple, God’s overcoming testimony. In the New Testament, it represents the overcoming testimony of the church. In Zion, God laid a stumbling stone and a rock of offense, both of which are Christ. Yet whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame. To the Israelites who pursued the righteousness of the Law with works, He was the stumbling stone and a rock of offense; yet to those who obtain the righteousness by faith, He is a rock to trust in, so that whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.

It may be hard for us to think of Christ as both the stumbling stone and a rock of offense. To our feeling, the Lord is full of support and lovingkindness. Our thought is that when we come to Him after we fail, He will comfort us, encourage us, and strengthen us. This experience is true and healthy, but it is not deep enough. We still need to see that Christ causes people to stumble.

We may think that if we love the Lord and consecrate ourselves to Him, others will appreciate our experience. However, this is not the case. For some reason, it seems that whenever the Lord is working in us, people will be stumbled, especially those who are closest to us. When we begin to love the Lord, follow Him, and live absolutely for Him, many people will be stumbled by our absoluteness. When we are restored by the Lord, many people will be stumbled by our restoration. When we are willing to consecrate all of our life and time to the Lord, many people will be stumbled by such service. This is because the Lord is a stumbling stone and a rock of offense.

Even to those who follow the Lord, Christ often seems to be a great boulder sitting in the way. If the Lord works among us in a strong way or leads us in a strong way, we are easily stumbled. This stumbling is actually the Lord's mercy, to teach us to rely only on Him. If we say, "I can step over this little stone!" the Lord will say, "I am the stone of stumbling. When you pick up your foot, I will grow three feet higher to cause you to stumble!" If we actually do make it over this stone of stumbling, we will say in our heart, "Thank the Lord! I have passed this obstacle and my spiritual growth is progressing forward!" However, just at the moment we move to take another step forward, we may find that this stone is again before us and it suddenly grows much higher for us to be stumbled again! This is for us to know Him as the stumbling stone and the rock of offense.

Believing in Him

Paul added a word here: "he who believes in Him will not be disappointed." Why would we not be disappointed? It is because the more we stumble on the Lord, the more we will believe in and rely on Him. The more we stumble, the more we learn to stand on Him. God's work is wonderful.

When Jesus was a baby, Simeon held Him and said to Mary, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed” (Luke 2:34). The Lord was destined not only for the fall of many, but also for the rise of many! This is why Paul could say that those who believe in Him will not be disappointed.

As we follow the Lord, it will seem like the Lord is continually revealing things to us to stumble us and cause us to feel that we are unable to follow His footsteps. However, He will also continually cause us to understand that whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed. Sometimes we consecrate ourselves to the Lord with tears, yet at the same time we are stumbled as we think of the many reasonable, legal, and fair needs of life. Even when people tearfully consecrate themselves to the Lord, at the same time, they always think of their living, family, and future. Oh, do not forget that the stone is always laid in front of us! This stone is for us to stumble, yet at the same time this causes us to believe in the Lord more.

A person who follows the Lord will find it normal to deal with frustration and difficulty in outward environments. For example, it is very rare for the people in our lives to encourage us when we truly follow the Lord. This can be a frustrating experience. If we are willing to follow the Lord and put everything in His hands, we should prepare to see a stumbling stone before our feet. Eventually, we must realize that our hope does not come from our environment but from our belief. Whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame!

If Christ were not such a rock, it would be very hard for us to know how precious He is. This rock is always in front of those who follow the Lord. If we do not take Christ as our focus, we will stumble on Him and be exposed. If we take Christ as our focus, we will find that this stone is not for us to stumble on, but for us to believe in. This is where the sweetness of following the Lord is found.

The Lord is a stone. It is He who causes stumbling, and it is He who saves. It is He who hinders, and it is He who

perfects. It is He who limits us, and it is He who frees us. If we do not properly walk in the Lord's way, He is the stumbling stone. Yet when we believe in Him, He is a strong and firm rock. Oh, the preciousness of the stumbling stone is truly found in faith and not works, and this belief is something that will not disappoint us!

In Accordance with Knowledge

Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. ²For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. ³For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

—Romans 10:1–3

WORD STUDY

In Romans 10:2, Paul testifies that the Israelites have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. The Greek work used here for “knowledge” is *epignōsis*. This word is composed of two Greek words: *epi*, meaning, “over, upon” (Strong, #1909), and *gnōskō*, meaning, “to know” (Strong, #1097). *Gnōskō* generally refers to knowledge gained and grounded in learning and personal experience. The word leaves room for the further gaining of knowledge and understanding by seeing and observing more (Thayer, 117–118). *Epignōsis* denotes “exact or full knowledge, discernment, recognition,” and expresses knowledge that powerfully influences the knower (Vine, 348). In other words, the Israelites’ zeal for God was not according to an accurate or full knowledge that would change their behavior.

The Greek word used for “establish” in verse 3, *histēmi*, means “to stand, to set up, to establish” (Strong, #2476) and was used by the Greeks, especially concerning the erecting of a statue or monument. In this verse, it implies that the Israelites would raise a monument of their own righteousness for their own glory rather than submit to God’s righteousness for His glory (Rogers, 334).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

A Contrast

The similarities and contrasts between the beginnings of Romans 9 and 10 are important to notice. Chapter 9 begins with Paul’s urgency regarding the Israelites. He even wrote that he could wish that he were accursed, separated from Christ for his Jewish brethren. Here in chapter 10, the first thing Paul speaks of is his hope that the Israelites would be saved. He wishes not only that they would arrive at salvation, but that they would allow salvation to be fully realized in them.

In chapter 9, Paul listed many blessings the Israelites had obtained—the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the service to God, the promises, the fathers, and the earthly lineage leading to Christ. However, in chapter 10, Paul is not concerned with the origin or possessions of the nation of Israel but with their pursuit of God. What kind of people were they? They were full of zeal for God, but not according to full knowledge.

Full Knowledge

The Israelites were quite knowledgeable. They knew about God, and they knew that He has an eternal will. Their zeal

for God was in some ways very valuable, but unfortunately, it was not “in accordance with knowledge.” The Greek word used here for “knowledge,” *epignōsis*, indicates full knowledge, true knowledge, and rich knowledge based on revelation. A person who desires to be one with God in living and truth must live unto Him according to complete knowledge.

To follow the Lord is not only a matter of our willingness and desire, but it is also a matter of our knowledge of the Lord. The Israelites were zealous, perhaps even more zealous than we are today. They may have loved God more than we do, and they may have lived more piously than we do. However, through God’s mercy, we have to say that our knowledge is fuller and more complete.

In verse 2, Paul did not use *gnōsis* (knowledge), but *epignōsis*. This means that after gaining some knowledge of God, we should not be content but should fight to gain richer, higher, and greater knowledge! Our knowledge of the Lord should grow more and more! Our knowledge of Him will grow according to our measure of His life.

Establishing Our Own Righteousness

Verse 3 gives a short progression—the Israelites were ignorant of God’s righteousness, sought to establish their own righteousness, and did not submit to the righteousness of God. If we do not have rich knowledge through revelation, the result will be our efforts to establish our own righteousness, working out righteousness by who we are and what we have. The Israelites were like this. They had heard the word of God, had seen the work of His hands, and were established as His testimony. However, they were short of knowledge, and they wanted to establish their own righteousness. The result was their refusal to submit to God’s righteousness.

The Greek word for “establish” includes not only building something but also upholding and maintaining it. Establishing our own righteousness means building our righteousness up as a statue that looks special, grand, and wonderful.

This is the instinct of religious people. Religious people want to establish their own righteousness. They find it hard to not build up and establish their own righteousness. Religious people are those who have left God and exchanged knowledge, understanding, and comprehension of God for a more tangible resource, something that can be used to build their own statue.

This is not peculiar to the nation of Israel. Even Christians often want to do the same thing. The Israelites wanted to establish their own righteousness according to what they saw, and Christians sometimes unconsciously want to do the same thing. Whenever we are short of the supply of the divine life in our spirit, or whenever we are short of the presence of the Lord, we become religious people who desire to establish our own righteousness.

Whether Israelite or Christian, many people unconsciously desire to establish their own righteousness according to what they have seen. The Israelites had been given the Law by God, but the requirement of the Law was accomplished by Christ, and the reality of the Law was lived out in His life. The Israelites saw the demand of the Law, but this demand is fulfilled by Christ. He is the end of the Law, and as soon as we receive Christ, we obtain the reality and living of the Law. However, even Christians can replace Christ and seek to establish their own righteousness.

The Israelites saw the Law and desired to establish their own righteousness. Christians have seen the accomplishment of Christ, yet still often desire to establish their own righteousness. It is possible at any point to build up a statue for ourselves based on limited knowledge. Do not think the name “Christian” protects us. Those who think they can do everything by themselves without relying on or needing Christ have

replaced Christ and sought to establish their own righteousness. The result is a resistance to God's righteousness.

It is for this reason Paul adds the next verse: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4).

The End of the Law

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

—Romans 10:4

WORD STUDY

The Greek word translated “end,” *telos*, could mean several different things. It could indicate the “conclusion” or “fulfillment” of an act or state. This matches the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:17: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.” *Telos* could also mean “termination,” implying that believers in Christ are no longer under the legislative authority of the system of law. Finally, *telos* can also indicate a “goal” or “purpose” that is reached at the end of a journey. If used in this sense, *telos* would indicate that the Law points toward Christ and serves to bring people to Him. This thought is found in Galatians 3:24: “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.”

Together, these three definitions show that Christ could be the fulfillment of the Law for righteousness, the termination of the Law, or the goal of the Law. Any of these three senses of the word may be correct, and scholars and commentators

differ from one another in this matter (Strong, #5056; Alford, 2:417; Vincent, 3:112).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

As mentioned in chapter 143, in Romans 9–11, Paul deals with five aspects of God’s sovereignty. Romans 10:4–21 deals with the fifth of these aspects, which is that God’s sovereignty is displayed through Christ.

The End of the Law

What does it mean that “Christ is the end of the Law”? From the side of experience, the end of our experience of the Law is Christ. From the side of truth, the end of our knowledge of the Law is Christ. From the side of revelation, the end of our seeing of the Law is still Christ. Whether from experience, truth, or revelation, the Law eventually concludes in a living Savior: Christ.

The word “end” (*telos*) implies going through a process to arrive at a goal. There is a beginning, a process, and an end. We can also say that there is a starting point, a journey, and a destination. The destination is Christ Himself. From one angle, Christ is the end, the result, and conclusion of the Law. From another angle, the Law is our tutor to bring us to Christ (Gal. 3:24) so that we may be justified by faith and live unto Him.

The Law as Our Tutor

This verse is profound in its simplicity: the end of the Law is Christ! This is not only the declaration of a spiritual truth but is also a spiritual experience of being brought to Christ by

the Law. This was Paul's experience. He said in Romans 7:15, "For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate." This was his life under the Law, an experience we all share. We experience this because we are willing to do what pleases God according to the truth we have heard, according to our natural religious zeal, and according to the good part in us created by God. Most people live under this principle of the Law. However, Paul eventually said, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). Like Paul, we have received grace from God and been brought to Christ by the Law, which acts as our tutor.

The Law is only a tutor to bring us to Christ. For this reason, we should not despise any one's legalistic resolutions before the Lord. If a brother says, "I will never lie or be angry," do not despise such an impossible promise. Such a resolution is indeed in the principle of the Law, but the Law will eventually bring him to Christ. The resolutions people make before the Lord are not small things. Even if we feel their resolutions are childish, the Law will bring them to Christ by being their tutor.

The Law Causing Us to Seek Christ

The reason God gave the Law to the Israelites was for them to know themselves. God did not merely give the Law for people to struggle to accomplish it but for them to know that they could not attain it by themselves. Such a realization should have caused them to seek God.

Though the Gentiles do not have the written Law, the function of the Law has been written in their hearts (Rom. 2:15). Even if they do not have the outward written Law, they have the inward function of the Law to tell them, remind them, and warn them of sin. This inward sense is what we call the conscience. The conscience functions even within

people who have not believed in the Lord. The function of the Law that God wrote within us should cause us to seek Christ our Savior.

I once heard a gospel preacher say, “Good men go to hell and sinners receive eternal life.” Why is this? It is because the Law causes people to know their sin. Good people do not feel that they have any sin, therefore they perish (Luke 5:31–32, 18:9–14). On the contrary, those in whom the Law functions will see that they are sinners with transgressions and shortcomings, and this knowledge will compel them to seek the Savior unto eternal life.

The Righteousness of the Law Becoming Ours in Christ

The end of the Law is Christ to everyone who believes in Him. The Law is concluded in Christ. When we believe in Christ, the righteousness of the Law becomes real in us. This is not simply a revelation of truth but is also a subjective experience.

In the early stages of our following the Lord, we may still live in the principle of the Law. This is not a fearful thing. What is fearful is if we are not brought to Christ, and instead hold on to victories and failures by continually asking, “Did I make it? Did I overcome?” We should have confidence that victories and failures mean nothing, strength means nothing, and weakness means nothing, because “I” have died and now Christ lives in me (Gal. 2:20). This realization by faith is accomplished by our living in Christ, the One who is the end of the Law and the One in whom we obtain the reality of righteousness.

The Speaking of the Righteousness Based on Faith

For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. ⁶But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down), ⁷or ‘who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).”

—Romans 10:5–7

WORD STUDY

In Romans 10:5–7, Paul twice refers to the word of Moses. Verse 5 is based on Leviticus 18:5, while verses 6 and 7 are quoted with a slight variation from Deuteronomy 30:12–13. In Deuteronomy, Moses warned the Jews the consequences of rejecting God’s Law, yet foretold His mercy to them if they would return to Him. Moses then described the Law in nearly the words cited here in Romans. When Moses spoke to the Israelites, it was a reassurance that God’s commandments were not too far away from them—the commandments were not in heaven or beyond the sea. Why would Paul subtly change the emphasis and object of these verses from the Law to Christ? Rather than explaining this by saying Paul simply adapted the verses to his own purpose, we can say Paul saw something deeper— Christ is the end of the

Law (Romans 10:4). H. Alford writes, “If [these words were] spoken of the law as a manifestation of God in man’s heart and mouth, much more were they spoken of Christ, who is God manifest in the flesh, the end of the law and the prophets” (Alford, 2:418).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The Reality of the Commandments: Christ

As we come to Romans 10:5–7, we must remember that Christ is the end of the Law (Rom. 10:4). He Himself is the reality of our divine and heavenly experience of the righteousness based on faith. This experience is related to both the incarnation (v. 6) and resurrection (v. 7) of Christ.

Romans 10:6–7 is quoted from Moses:

For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?” (Deut. 30:11–13)

Moses was speaking of the commandments, but Paul realized that Moses was prophetically speaking of the reality of the commandments. Where is this reality? If it were in heaven, none of us could reach it. If it were over the sea, none of us could find it. However, the righteousness based on faith speaks in this way: “The reality of the commandments is Christ. He came to the earth from the heavens. He was incarnated and dwelt among us! He has also come out of the abyss! He has been raised from the dead and dwells within us!”

Paul is concerned only with Christ Himself in these verses. As far as Paul is concerned in Romans 10:6–7, as soon as we believe in Christ, all the problems have been solved. The quotation of the Old Testament here shows us Paul’s great wisdom. These verses show that the reality of the Old Testament commandments, a reality that is spoken of by the righteousness based on faith, is Christ, who is for us to experience and enjoy.

Our Experience of Christ as Righteousness

Through His incarnation and resurrection, Christ now dwells in us through faith, and He Himself has become our righteousness based on faith. This righteousness speaks only of Christ Himself. Moreover, as we experience the Christ who lives in us through faith, we experience the righteousness that is based on faith. This righteousness is not a theory or a status but something for us to experience!

Because our righteousness based on faith is the Christ who dwells within us, this righteousness brings us into both the reality of incarnation and the power of resurrection. It is a righteousness we can experience in our daily life, and it is very different from the moral teachings of man. Confucius, for example, was an ancient philosopher who taught people not to see, hear, speak, or even move without courtesy. Honestly speaking, his teachings are regulations that people cannot fulfill. The Christian life is different! Our being, our experiences, and our actions are all through the righteousness based on faith. In this righteousness, all the experiences Christ has gone through become real to us.

The Word Is Near You

But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart”—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, ⁹that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

—Romans 10:8–9

WORD STUDY

H. Alford said, “Let not the man, who sighs for deliverance from his own sinfulness, suppose that the accomplishment of some impossible task is required of him, in order to enjoy the blessings of the gospel. We do not mock the sinner by offering him happiness on conditions which we know he is powerless to fulfill. We tell him that Christ’s word is near to him: so near, that he may speak of it with his mouth, and meditate on it with his heart. The anxious follower after righteousness is not disappointed by an impracticable code, nor mocked by an unintelligible revelation: the word is *near him*, therefore *accessible; plain and simple*, and therefore *apprehensible*” (Alford, 2:419, italics original).

In Greek, both uses of “word” in Romans 10:8 are *rhēma*, one of the most prominent Greek nouns translated as “word”

in the New Testament, along with the Greek noun *logos*. The Greek word for “confess” in verse 9, *homologēsēs*, is a compound word that includes the word *logos* (Strong, #3670). *Logos* is generally a much more comprehensive term than *rhēma*, signifying both the inward thought and the outward form by which the inner thought is expressed (Vincent, 2:25).

Concerning *logos*, G. Kittel writes, “It is obvious that the main emphasis of the term is always on saying something.... It always contains the living concept of a spoken word, in [the case of John 1:1] the word spoken by God to the world. When it is the word of revelation, in some way the decisive thing is recollection of the One who in living reality speaks this word. The word is never an independent entity. As a genuine word, it always finds its essence and meaning in the fact that it points to Him who spoke it” (Kittel, 4:102).

W. E. Vine says of *logos*: “The phrase ‘the word of the Lord,’ that is, the revealed will of God...is used of a direct revelation given by Christ....Sometimes it is used as the sum of God’s utterances.” Concerning *rhēma*, he says that it is not the whole Word, but the individual words brought to us by the Spirit in our time of need (Vine, 683).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4). The applying and obtaining of righteousness is in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ (vv. 6–7). The righteousness of faith is also related to the word. This word is near to us for our daily enjoyment and application.

This word is how we experience the righteousness based on faith. Christ is both the righteousness based on faith and the living word. It is interesting that Paul uses the Greek word *rhēma* here. *Rhēma* is the word of God that addresses our current environments and situations, and helps us in our time of need. It is near us, in our mouths and in our hearts.

This shows us that Christ is the timely, or instant, word of operation and working.

The Timely Word Leading to the Constant Word

The Greek word for “confess” in verse 9, *homologēsēs*, is a compound that includes the word *logos*. *Logos* is the constant and eternal word, and the word of revelation. The timely word (*rhēma*) in verse 8 brings the confession in verse 9, a confession that bears the thought of *logos*. In other words, the operation of the timely word (*rhēma*) within us must bring us to the revelation and vision of the constant word (*logos*). The Lord has given us the timely word, which is near us. When this timely word is mingled and blended within us, the constant word of revelation is obtained.

This constant word (*logos*) is God’s will, purpose, plan, and economy. If some Christians daily receive the timely word (*rhēma*) but are not brought to the word of revelation (*logos*), they will not grow well spiritually. If they only have the timely word of the Lord, yet are short of basic revelation and vision, the *rhēma* will not have much value to them. Do not boast, saying, “I have prayed to the Lord, and He has spoken to me. In my pursuit of the Lord, He constantly speaks to me about many matters and situations.” We should understand that the issue is not whether the Lord has spoken to us, but whether His *rhēma* leads us to the *logos*. If the *rhēma* we receive from the Lord does not lead us to the *logos*, the timely word ultimately does not have much value.

Regulated by the Constant Word

In leading us to the constant word, the timely word has true value. In the Old Testament age of the judges, all of the

judges had the instant and timely word of God. Even Samson had the timely word of God, but consider what a poor judge he was! A person's true value in God's economy does not lie in the timely word but in the constant word. Moses was a valuable man before God because he not only possessed God's instant word, *rhēma*, but was also filled with and regulated by the *logos*, the constant word of revelation, vision, and view.

We need to have both aspects of God's word. The *rhēma* not only needs to lead us to the *logos* but also needs to be regulated by it. In other words, the instant words from God that deal with our situations must be regulated by His constant word, which deals with our vision and view. We should be cautious and not quickly say, "I prayed and felt very peaceful that the Lord spoke to me in such-and-such a way." We should instead tell the Lord, "I need Your timely word, but I also ask You to speak to me with Your constant word. When You speak Your *rhēma* to me, please regulate me according to Your *logos*. In this way, Lord, establish me firmly in Your divine economy."

The Word Being Near Us

The Greek word for "near," *engus*, means "at hand or near" both in space and in time (Strong, #1451). The living word is therefore not only near us in space but also in time. Though our Lord will come again one day, His word is near us right now, able to give instant and timely help.

This word is based on God's desire and will. It is according to God's heart for this word to be near us, to help us, to meet our need, and to address our problems. Through His instant word, we are built up and established in His will.

We often face many things that bother us, and we have many problems that are not easily solved. But the word is near us. By the timely word of the Lord, we are often rescued

in our environments to enjoy the perfecting and building up
in His will.

Confessing Jesus as Lord

That if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; ¹⁰for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. ¹¹For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.”

—Romans 10:9–11

WORD STUDY

The Greek word translated “confess” in the beginning of Romans 10:9, *homologeō*, means “to profess, to declare openly, speak out freely” (Thayer, 446). It is actually a compound of two other Greek words: *homos*, meaning “the same, or, together” (Strong, #3674), and *logos*, often translated “word” or “speaking” (Strong, #3056). *Homos* implies the togetherness of multiple individuals or objects and is used to indicate an assembly of people (Thayer, 446). In its most pregnant sense, *logos* is the word of revelation and always points back to its source—the One who in living reality spoke it (Kittel, 4:102). In this sense, *logos* is a spoken word that carries within it the content and essence of God Himself.

Verse 10 speaks of believing, resulting in righteousness, and confession, resulting in salvation. In both phrases, the words “resulting in” are translated from the Greek word *eis*. *Eis* is a common Greek preposition that can be translated “to” or “into” for spacial movement, or “unto” to indicate a purpose or result (Strong, #1519). Thus, righteousness and salvation could be seen as the purpose or result of believing and confessing, or even a realm we enter into by believing and confessing.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In the previous few chapters, which covered Romans 10:6–8, we saw that the righteousness based on faith is Christ Himself, and that Christ is the instant word. This word is near us—so near that it is in our mouth and heart. This word causes us to confess the Lord Jesus with our mouth and believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead. This belief is unto righteousness, while this confession is unto salvation.

Confessing the Lord Jesus

At first, verse 9 sounds very simple. However, it is actually extremely deep. The Greek word translated “confess,” *homologeō*, is composed of *homos* (together) and *logos* (word). *Logos* shows that this confession does not belong to the physical realm, while *homos* shows that it is not an action solely taken by one person. We may think that it is we as individuals who confess the Lord Jesus, but in reality, this confession involves a union and togetherness. We are not the only ones involved in this confession. God is also involved, revealing to us His word (*logos*), which causes us to react by confessing the Lord Jesus with our mouth.

We may think that we often confess the Lord Jesus with our mouth. For example, whenever something unfortunate

happens, we may cry out, “Lord Jesus!” Yet many who cry out with their mouth in this way are not really confessing Jesus as their Lord. The true confession must be “together”—us together with God. This confession is produced by the word (*logos*) of God. When God gives us His *logos* and we receive the revelation of this word, the revelation produces a reaction in us, the reaction of confession.

This confession does not belong to the physical realm, nor is it an action accomplished by us alone. Rather, this confession is the result of the union between us and the divine revelation, which is produced by the revealing of the word of God (*logos*) in our spirit. This confession is a divine, heavenly, and sweet action. It is so wonderful that we can confess Jesus as our Lord in every situation and place!

Revelation, Identification, and Confession

When God gives us His word (*logos*), the Holy Spirit reveals the reality of the Savior to us—that is, the person, work, and accomplishments of the Lord Jesus. This revelation causes us not only to believe into God but also to believe that God raised Christ from the dead. This revelation brings in our identification with Christ, and this identification in turn brings harmony and incorporation with Him in life.

Divine revelation produces our identification with Christ so we might confess the Lord Jesus and have an inward, unexplainable peacefulness. This is like our relationship with family members. Consider children who have been apart from their parents for many years. When they meet one day, a mutual harmony is suddenly produced, and all the years of loneliness and oppression disappear through their identification with one another.

The seemingly simple word “confession” actually reveals some things about all who confess the Lord Jesus. Such people have received in their spirit the revelation of the Holy

Spirit, have seen the reality of the Savior Christ, and have genuinely identified with this reality. This identification is crucial. Receiving the revelation in our spirit, seeing the Savior, and realizing His reality should bring us to identify with this reality. It is this identification that then causes us to confess the Lord Jesus.

Confessing the Lord Jesus with our mouths is a very wonderful thing! We should learn to say to the Lord in all circumstances, “Lord, please give me revelation in everything so that I could be united, mingled, and identified with You. Lord, I want to be full of divine revelation to see all people, things, and matters around me in the divine economy. Lord, I even desire that such vision would make me one with You. Whatever You do, I would do. Whatever You want, I would want. For such a oneness and operation in one accord with You, I willingly confess You as my Lord.”

Entering into Righteousness and Salvation

Verse 10 says that with the heart is belief resulting in righteousness, and that with the mouth is confession resulting in salvation. As seen in chapter 153, righteousness is the reality of incarnation and resurrection. With this reality, we obtain the righteousness based on faith, that is, we enter into the realm of righteousness.

For us, righteousness is not only something obtained but also a realm for us to live in. When we believe in our hearts, we enter the realm of righteousness. When we confess with our mouths, we enter the realm of salvation. In this realm, the timely and instant word (*rhēma*), which is near us, helps us trust in God so that we will not be disappointed, as verse 11 says, “Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.”

Calling on the Name of the Lord

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; ¹³for “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

—Romans 10:12–13

WORD STUDY

An important verb in Romans 10:12–13 is “call,” *epikaleō*, which is in the middle voice here. This voice changes the sense of the word from simply naming someone to calling “upon [someone] for oneself, in one’s behalf: anyone as a helper” (Thayer, 239). It implies calling out to someone for aid, and it was often used to express man’s cry to the divine (Rogers, 335).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

From Romans 10:12–13, a very important concept emerges: calling on the name of the Lord.

God's Calling and Our Calling

In Romans 10:12–13, the Greek word for “call” means a crying out to God for help or salvation. Yet until God calls us, we do not even realize our need. For us to truly call on the Lord, we must first experience God’s calling. Whenever God calls us, this produces a response in us to call on Him.

Calling on the name of the Lord does not only mean audibly calling, “O Lord Jesus!” On the one hand, this is a precious lifelong experience, because to call on the name of the Lord is to call the Lord Himself. When we are discouraged or dry, it is very good to audibly call on the name of the Lord Jesus. On the other hand, this is not enough, because truly calling on the Lord must be according to God’s calling.

When a man I know became engaged to a woman he had been dating, he was so happy that he often unconsciously spoke his fiancée’s name aloud! In a sense, he was called by his fiancée, and this caused him to speak of her out loud. Similarly, God calls us with His love, and by seeing His love and purpose, we call on Him, praying, “Lord, may Your will be done. Lord, may I love You more, belong to You more, and follow You my whole life. Lord, may You gain my whole person!” This is calling on the Lord according to His calling of us.

In Romans 10:8, the timely word (*rhēma*) is near us. This timely word leads us to the word of revelation, the *logos* (see chapter 154). The *logos* then produces a divine calling, which draws out of us the highest calling on the Lord. Thus, the timely word brings us to the constant word of revelation, which eventually produces in us a calling on the Lord. Our calling on the Lord is related to the *logos*, because it is generated by the calling that comes from the *logos*.

Whenever God’s calling comes, our calling on the Lord also comes. God calls us to love Him, to serve Him, to build up the body of Christ, and to preach the gospel. In all of these callings, we respond by calling on the name of the Lord.

Because of our love of God, we call on Him. Because of serving Him, we call on Him. Because of the building up of the body of Christ, we call on Him. Because of gospel preaching, we call on Him. All of our calling on Him is based on God's calling. This is the highest calling on the name of the Lord.

Brought into Complete Salvation

Romans 10:13 says that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. This salvation is not only a believing in Jesus; it is God's complete and full salvation. This is what we are brought into by the highest calling on the name of the Lord. God has called us to be glorified (8:30). In the process of glorification, we need to continually call on Him!

Calling on the Lord causes us to be related to this sovereign Lord (10:12). Calling on Him also relates us to the body of Christ. The more we call on the Lord, the more we feel related to the brothers and sisters around us. Calling on the Lord allows us to experience all His rich wisdom and knowledge in His sovereign arrangement and to experience His salvation in all situations and places. Therefore, whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!

Those Who Preach the Good News

How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!” ¹⁶However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our report?” ¹⁷So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

¹⁸But I say, surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have; “Their voice has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.” ¹⁹But I say, surely Israel did not know, did they? First Moses says, “I will make you jealous by that which is not a nation, by a nation without understanding will I anger you.” ²⁰And Isaiah is very bold and says, “I was found by those who did not seek Me, I became manifest to those who did not ask for Me.” ²¹But as for Israel He says, “All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.”

—Romans 10:14–21

WORD STUDY

A reader of Romans 10:14–15 may immediately notice the importance of a preacher (v. 14) and preaching (v. 15).

Indeed, these verses inspired Martin Luther to write, “So, then, the entire source and origin of salvation rests on this, that God sends out someone—a true minister of the Word” (Luther, 149–150).

Two Greek words that are used in this passage are *kērussō* and *euangelizō*. The first, *kērussō*, is used twice: “And how will they hear without a preacher (*kērussō*)? How will they preach (*kērussō*) unless they are sent?” (vv. 14–15). *Kērussō* literally means “to herald (as a public crier)” and can be translated either “preach” or “preacher” (Strong, #2784). The word itself does not necessarily denote a preacher of the gospel of God.

However, in the New Testament, *euangelizō* is “almost always used of ‘the good news’ concerning the Son of God as proclaimed in the gospel” (Vine, 481). It is used in Romans 10:15: “Those who bring good news (*euangelizō*) of good things.” Thus, *euangelizō* is much more specific regarding the content of the proclamation. W. E. Vine writes, “[*Kērussō*] indicates the ‘preacher’ as giving a proclamation; [*euangelizō*] points to his message as glad tidings; *apostolos* (‘sent,’ v. 15) suggests his relationship to Him by whom he is sent” (Vine, 482).

Another interesting description in these verses is the “beautiful feet” of the preachers of the good news. The Greek word used here for “beautiful,” *hōraios*, actually indicates the blooming maturity of flowers or the idea of development (Vincent, 3:116). The Greek word originally carried the idea of “seasonable, ripe, or timely” before it came to be used to mean beauty, fairness, loveliness, or pleasant. The idea in this verse may be that these feet are “timely” or have “come at the right time” (Rogers, 335).

M. R. Vincent writes that feet emphasize the rapid approach of the messenger and “are symbols of the earnestly desired movement and appearance of the Gospel itself” (Vincent, 3:116).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In Romans 10:14–21, Paul talks about the divine and heavenly reality being lived out of us in our preaching of Him. This is why Paul seems so concerned with the matter of preaching in this section. Actually, this is God’s desire. He wants to gain preachers so people would hear the Lord, believe in Him, and call on His name.

Gospel Preachers

The term “preacher” (*kērussō*) means “a herald.” For example, it is like a king sending an officer to proclaim his order or message. When a king is enthroned or has won a battle, there will be someone riding a horse to preach this news in city after city. This is like the “preacher” here.

Why is this important? We who preach the gospel should not despise ourselves. Rather gospel preachers are people of great honor, announcing great news.

The Preacher’s Operation: Like an Apostle

Verse 15 says, “How will they preach unless they are sent?” This implies that it is impossible to preach without first being sent. In other words, everyone who preaches the gospel is a sent one! Here, “sent” is translated from the Greek word *apostello*, the verb form of the noun *apostolos*, which is usually translated as “apostle.” An apostle is literally a sent one, and here, anyone who preaches the gospel is also sent. From this point of view, a person who preaches the gospel is carrying out the operation of an apostle.

The Preacher's Message: Christ

Verse 15 also says that these preachers “bring good news of good things.” The Greek word here for “good things,” *agatha*, is also used in Mark 10:17 when a rich young man calls Jesus “Good Teacher.” What does it mean to preach the gospel and bring good news of good things? It means to preach Christ.

Here, *agatha* is plural, thus the translation “good things.” This refers not only to Christ, but also to the many beneficial aspects of Christ. In whatever aspect we consider, the blessing of Christ for us is good. Concerning our sins, they can be forgiven. Concerning our spirit, it can be regenerated. Concerning our status, we can be heavenly. Concerning our being, we can become the sons of God. Concerning our living, we can enjoy strength upon strength. In every aspect, the gospel is always good news of good things!

The Preacher's Labor: With Beautiful Feet

Those who preach the gospel and bring good news of good things have beautiful feet (Rom. 10:15). This is against our concept, because our feet are closest to the dust. However, Paul singles out the feet as the beautiful part of a gospel preacher! This is because feet are for labor, for the preaching of the gospel, and for bringing good news of good things. To all who hear the gospel, the feet of the message-bearers are indeed beautiful.

In Greek, “beautiful” (*hōraios*) not only indicates beauty but a beauty that is also mature, proper, and decent. First, *hōraios* can mean “mature” or “timely,” indicating that our feet must bring the gospel to meet people’s needs in a timely manner. Second, it means that those who preach the gospel have feet that are not only beautiful but also proper and decent. There are many outwardly beautiful things in the

world, but their beauty may not be proper or decent. Gospel preaching is beautiful, and when we present ourselves before others as gospel preachers, we should be proper and decent in our attitude, our speaking, and our message.

The Preacher's Experience: Others' Disobedience

In Romans 10:16, Paul mentions the experience of a gospel preacher—others' failure to heed their preaching. On the one hand, the feet of gospel preachers are beautiful and full of honor; on the other hand, many people will not believe the gospel that is preached. Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah, who said, "Lord, who has believed our report?" This is like a bucket of cold water to a gospel preacher. It is hard to continually experience other people's disobedience, yet verse 17 offers some hope: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." The "word" in this verse is *rhēma*, the timely word of Christ.

The Preacher's Constitution: Full of the Word of Christ

In verse 17, *rhēma* is "the word of Christ." Verse 18 also contains *rhēma*: "their words (*rhēma*) [have gone out] to the ends of the world." In verse 17, the *rhēma* is of Christ; in verse 18, the *rhēma* is ours. This shows that the timely word of Christ must become ours as well! His timely word must become our timely words.

How does this happen? Christ first speaks timely words to us. Eventually, the many timely words spoken to us by Christ will be spoken out by us. The words of Christ become our words, and our words go to the ends of the world. Please notice that it is not said here that the "word of Christ" goes to

the ends of the world, but it says that “their words” go to the ends of the world. The word of Christ goes forth to the ends of the world by passing through us and becoming our words.

The Preacher’s Effectiveness: Producing Faith in Hearers

The result is marvelous, according to verse 17: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” Once the word of Christ is spoken by the gospel preacher and is heard by other people, it produces faith in those who hear.

The Preacher’s Understanding: Recognizing God’s Sovereignty

Gospel preachers must also be full of understanding, recognizing God’s sovereignty. God chooses and works in His sovereignty.

God’s sovereignty can be seen at work in the examples of the Gentiles and Israelites. In verse 19, Paul quotes Moses, and in verse 20, Isaiah. These words show how the foolish nation of Gentiles found the manifested God, though they did not seek or ask. However, concerning the Israelites, verse 21 says they were a disobedient and obstinate people, yet God stretched out His hands to them all day long. Consider this description of God. In His sovereignty, according to His selection, and in His love, He stretched out His hands all day to a disobedient and obstinate people. Oh, the way God operates in His sovereignty draws out of us an unspeakable worship toward Him. Praise the Lord!

Has God Rejected His People?

I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? ³“Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.” ⁴But what is the divine response to him? “I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”

—Romans 11:1-4

WORD STUDY

Romans 11 begins with a question regarding whether or not God has “rejected” His people (v. 1). The Greek verb used here for “rejected,” *apōtheō*, is composed of *apo*, meaning “off, that is, away” (Strong, #570), and *ōtheō*, meaning, “to shove” (Strong, #683). Thus, *apōtheō* carries the meaning of pushing or thrusting away (Vincent, 3:119).

Paul answers that God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew (v. 2). The Greek word used here for “foreknew,” *proginōskō*, is composed of *pro*, meaning “before” (Strong, #4253) and *ginōskō*, meaning “to know” (Strong, #1097).

Thus, the literal meaning of *proginōskō* is “to know beforehand” or “to foresee” (Strong, #4267). This same word is used in Romans 8:29 as the beginning or base of God’s preordained purpose and plan for man, which ends in glorification. Paul may have used “foreknew” here to remind the readers of God’s purpose and economy, and to show how firm God’s predestination and election stand (Luther, 155–156).

In the example of Elijah, Paul uses the phrase “he pleads with God against Israel” (Rom. 10:2). The Greek word here translated “pleads,” *entunchanō*, means “to entreat or make intercession” (Strong, #1793). The same word is used in Romans 8:27 for the Holy Spirit’s intercession for the saints. It seems there is nothing inherently positive or negative in the word, and intercession can be made for or against others (Vine, 330). Thus, Elijah’s pleading, or intercession, was against Israel, his own countrymen.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

After Romans 10, a chapter regarding the expression of God’s sovereignty through us, chapter 11 covers God’s economy in His selection. In the operation of His divine sovereignty, God has an economy. He has done different works in different ages according to His economy of selection, and all these works are in order to see His economy accomplished.

Not Rejecting His People

Had God rejected His people? If we are ever asked this, we should be quick to say, “No!” God, in His divine economy, did not cast away His people. Even in the age of Elijah, God had kept for Himself seven thousand men. It was no different in Paul’s day. The apostle Paul himself was an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a Hebrew born of a Hebrew,

and of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:5). Paul was proof that God had not rejected the people He foreknew and selected beforehand.

The Greek word for “rejected,” *apōtheō*, is a very strong word, composed of *apo* (away) and *ōtheō* (to push or shove). It means to push something away with force and strength, and to have nothing to do with it. What would it mean if God rejected His people? It would indicate God’s utter despising and rejection of them to the extent that He would want nothing to do with them. Does God reject His people in this way? Paul’s answer is firm: “May it never be!”

Verse 2 qualifies those God has not cast away—His people whom He foreknew. This indicates that God has an economy, and for this economy, He has an understanding and foreknowledge of the people He wanted to gain. Yet even Elijah, the greatest prophet in power and operation, did not apprehend God’s heart in this matter. This is why he accused the Israelites before Him.

Elijah’s Accusation

Elijah accused the Israelites, saying, “Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life” (Rom. 11:3). In the age of Elijah, the Israelites would not listen to the prophets and tore down the altars that were for the Lord. They should have lived properly before God, but they forsook His prophets and altars and even sought to kill Elijah. Yet those who truly desire to follow the Lord should not be surprised by this. Instead, they should prepare themselves for martyrdom. Watchman Nee used to say that his future was either rapture or martyrdom. What a resolution this is! Not everyone will be martyred, but everyone should have such a resolution.

In Greek, the words for “pleads...against” (v. 2) are *entunchanō* (to intercede) and *kata* (against). This is different

than the accusation in Romans 8:33: “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect?” The hostile charge in Romans 8:33 is actually a legal word, used for summoning someone to trial (see chapter 127), and it refers to Satan’s accusation of God’s children. Elijah’s accusation is different. It shows that a servant like Elijah, one who was greatly used by God, saw and experienced for himself the shortage of the Israelites. What he witnessed among them was far from the divine revelation he had obtained. It was like there was a chasm between what God had shown him and what he was seeing for himself. It was because of his limited human observation of the situation that, as he rose to intercede for Israel, his intercession instead became an accusation.

In the same way, our own interceding can easily become an accusation. For example, according to revelation from the Lord, the church should bear a certain testimony, yet what we see before us is often not according to our expectation. In such moments, there is a great chasm between our revelation and what we actually see before us. If we are not careful, our prayer and intercession will carry the savor of accusation.

We may pray for the young people of the church like this: “Lord, may You gain the hearts of these young people! They have been saved and often come to the church meetings. I thank and praise You for this. However, they are so bad. I can see the danger they are in—they seem to come into the meetings and leave without Christ. Lord, rescue them!” Such a prayer can taste like an accusation to God. We often unconsciously accuse the people of God. However, He is far above all of this. He hears the accusation in our prayer, yet He also hears the interceding amidst our accusations.

God’s Response to Elijah

Elijah’s accusation shows us how angry he was. He seemed to be saying, “God, I was the last one following You, I was

left alone, and now the people are seeking my life! If You are God, don't You see this?" Whom was Elijah really accusing? In reality, he not only accused the Israelites but also God. God's answer was very calm. He seemed to say, "I would like to give you some revelation, Elijah. I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed their knees to Baal. You think that you are the only one left, but you have seven thousand hidden companions. You are not seeing My work under My divine sovereignty."

The number seven could mean the completeness of God's work in time. According to Elijah, the Israelites' situation was a mess, but according to God, His work was complete. Additionally, seven is three plus four. Three is the number of God, and four is the number of creation. This could show that there is a proper cooperation between God and His creation. Therefore, the number of seven thousand could indicate that God's work in time is the highest and most complete. Seven thousand shows that what God has done is so good!

God seemed to say, "Elijah, why are you murmuring? The work I have done for Myself in My sovereignty is high and complete! Even if Israel has failed, killed My prophets, and torn down My altars, the seven thousand I reserved for Myself is the completeness of completeness. Your feelings are focused on the prophets and altars, but I would like to tell you that My work is complete, and it is complete one thousand fold. At the proper time, these unseen seven thousand will be manifested."

When we come to serve the Lord, we may find ourselves murmuring just like Elijah. In our lifelong following of the Lord, we should remember this word: "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men." Many times the outward situation seems to be totally hopeless, crushing, and inescapable, filled with nothing but pressure and darkness. But God's word here should produce an unexplainable and ever-present confidence within us.

We should remember and believe that God has kept for Himself seven thousand men, even if our outward

environment is as desolate as the situation in Elijah's age. No matter what our outward situation may be, we should always realize that God has kept for Himself the completeness of completeness. Trusting this comes from true faith and produces more faith.

God's Gracious Choice

In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. ⁶But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. ⁷What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; ⁸just as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day." ⁹And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. ¹⁰Let their eyes be darkened to see not, and bend their backs forever." ¹¹I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous.

—Romans 11:5–11

WORD STUDY

Romans 11:5 contains an important phrase: "God's gracious choice." The Greek word translated "choice," *eklogē*, is used as a noun, but denotes the act of picking out or choosing (Thayer, 197). To the Greeks, this word indicated choosing or selecting in favor of one of many possibilities and rejecting the others. Such a choice came only after viewing the possibilities from many angles with a concern for selecting the

best. This kind of choosing was done in an intelligent manner, as opposed to emotional or compulsive. Though emotion certainly can play a role in choice, this Greek word indicates the predominance of the rational element (Kittel, 4:148–149).

The word “gracious” shows that this choice is not made according to any human work, but that it is entirely of God’s free, unmerited favor (Alford, 2:426).

Two negative words are used in verses 7 and 11: “hardened” and “stumble.” The Greek word used in verse 7 for “hardened,” *pōros*, literally means, “to petrify,” and is used figuratively to indicate a rendering stupid or callous (Strong, #4456).

The question posed in verse 11 is, “[the Israelites] did not stumble so as to fall, did they?” The Greek word used here for “stumble,” *ptaiō*, means to trip and fall (Strong, #4417). It comes from the Greek word *piptō*, which essentially indicates a descent from a higher place to a lower (Thayer, 510). There is a sense to this word that indicates a completely irrecoverable fall, as a runner who falls on his face is put out of a race (Rogers, 336). Thus, the question posed by Paul may be whether the Israelites will fail to participate in, or will miss a share in, God’s salvation. He immediately answers: “May it never be!”

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Paul’s word in Romans 11:5 regarding the remnant of Israel is very sweet—there is still a remnant according to God’s gracious choice.

God’s Choosing

The Greek word for “choice,” *eklogē*, means to designate and indicates a careful choice. It also shares a root with another important Greek word, *logos*. *Eklogē* is derived from the

Greek words *ek* (out of) and *legō* (to speak) (see Strong, #1589, #1586), and *legō* is in turn a root of the Greek word *logos* (see Strong, #3056), which is God's constant word of revelation and economy. This constant word is able to produce a divine calling within us (see chapter 156).

The word used here for God's choice indicates that by His speaking we are called to leave our original position or status. This is the beginning of the process of God's calling, which produces a separation from sin and the world. As we further receive the word of God's calling, we continue to leave where we are to follow Him. This happens over and over until a complete and perfect separation is produced.

Christians are different from others in the world. According to God's gracious choosing, we have been called. This calling is complete and perfect, and it produces a separation in us. Even in school or at work, we are different from others. Choosing what path we ought to walk is not a matter of right or wrong; it is a matter of whether or not we are willing to allow God's calling to do a separating work within us.

For example, when a young brother graduates from an undergraduate program, there are many options open to him. He may go to graduate school, get a job, or may even serve the Lord full time. Any of these are good, but the question is whether there was any separation produced in him. In going to graduate school, he should be separated. In working, he should be separated. Even in serving the Lord, he should experience this separation. Those who have been called by God have been separated unto Him.

Because the Greek word for "choice" comes from *ek* (out of) and *legō* (to speak), we can say God's choosing is very much related to His speaking. God continually speaks to us, and His word brings with it a calling that produces a separation in us. This word is God Himself and is related to His eternal economy.

Because the Lord continually speaks to us, His calling is continually produced in us as well, and we become more and

more separated. The more the word of God abides in us, the more clear this calling becomes, the more complete our following becomes, and the more we are separated.

Some scholars explain that this word for “choice” indicates a choice that is more rational than emotional. In other words, God clearly understands those He has chosen. He not only loves us, but He also knows where He will bring us and how to transform and conform us to the image of His Son. God chose us not only due to His love but also because of His wisdom and power, for the accomplishment of His economy.

Bending Their Backs

In verse 7, Paul talks specifically about the Israelites and quotes several passages from the Old Testament. In verse 8, it says that the spirit of the Israelites is “of stupor.” Furthermore, God gave them eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear. As we will see later in Romans 11, God sovereignly gave these things to the Israelites so that they may one day gain His grace and mercy. How will this happen? The first step is for God to bend their backs.

By God’s mercy, there is still a remnant of Israel according to His gracious choice. Sooner or later, God will bend their backs for them to repent. In other words, one day the Israelites will suddenly feel the lack of their strength and power. Previously, they may have been able to strengthen themselves and live apart from God, but with backs that are bent, they will finally realize that they truly need God’s grace and mercy. They are presently eating and drinking in their feasts, their spirit is of stupor, their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear; but at the appointed time, God will bend their backs in His divine sovereignty.

In verse 7, “hardened” literally means “petrified.” The heart of the Israelites became petrified. Their heart was like a piece of wood that had been washed over for many years,

eventually accumulating minerals from the water. The gaps in their heart were totally filled, and they became so hard that not a drop of water could penetrate them.

Religious Jews today are no different. It is useless to try to teach them anything or to try to help them with anything spiritual. They live a paradoxical life. Their spirit is of stupor, their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear. Yet they live a life of ceremonial feasting. What a distraction this is! Their table becomes a snare, a trap, and a stumbling block. However, in His mercy, God will one day bend their backs and tell them, "You are not sufficient in yourselves. You need a Savior. You must accept Christ so you can stand and become the remnant according to My gracious choice."

Stumbling and Falling

It was not God's desire for the Israelites to stumble. Rather, His desire was simply for His salvation to come to the Gentiles. In Greek, "falling" (*piptō*) is the root of "stumbling" (*ptaiō*), and indicates irrevocably descending from a high place to a low place. The Israelites did not stumble so as to fall. Falling is quite serious. An outburst of anger is a type of stumbling. Anger can come and go in a minute. Such stumbling is not so serious, because a person may stumble in this way but may not fall. What is it to truly stumble and fall? It means to descend to a lower place and dwell there.

For example, consider a brother who greatly loves the Lord and takes care of many things in the church life. One day, this brother may be promoted at work and with a higher paycheck can afford to move to a more comfortable house and neighborhood. However, what if this neighborhood is far away from the church's meeting place? We would have to say that as far as his service goes, his new home is unsuitable and his new lifestyle may be unbeneficial to the church. I have seen brothers in this situation, and I have seen how

their practical situations led to their spiritual condition falling. Oh, this is real stumbling and falling! According to material wealth, they ascended. According to spiritual life, they descended and can be said to have stumbled and fallen.

As Christians, our greatest fear should be an improper “settling down” by dwelling in a lower place. This settling down can be both spiritual and physical. An improper spiritual settling down is to dwell in anything that is not heavenly, anything that is not concerned with the saints, or anything not centered on the Lord and His church. We should not dwell in such a low place! We can also have a practically and physically improper settling down by living in a place that is unsuitable for a healthy church life. It is amazing how much such a practical thing can influence our spiritual lives.

We should not say, “This is my life and decision, I will do what I want and live where I want!” Such an attitude will lead to us dwelling improperly. Instead, our attitude should be to settle down wherever is most beneficial to God, His economy, and to the saints. When our spiritual dwelling place is not in Christ, we will surely stumble and fall. When our practical dwelling place is not centered on the church, we will also surely stumble and fall. We should be like Abraham, who was a wanderer in the world. With such an attitude, we will not stumble or fall before the Lord.

God’s Sovereign Mercy

Even though the Israelites had stumbled, our God is still full of mercy. From man’s point of view, it seems that God’s choice failed, because His chosen people, the Israelites, rejected Christ. From God’s point of view, this stumbling happened under His divine sovereignty for the sake of accomplishing His will—that salvation would come to the Gentiles. This is all according to God’s mercy and compassion.

If the Israelites had not stumbled, the birth of Jesus would have meant nothing to the Gentiles. If the Israelites had not stumbled, the salvation of the cross also would have meant nothing to the Gentiles. If the Israelites had not stumbled, it would be impossible for Gentiles, who were not God's people, to accept Christ, to be saved, and to enjoy the reality of salvation. Because of the stumbling of the Israelites, Gentiles can say, "Our Lord has come! He was born among men, was crucified by them, and has proclaimed divine salvation through resurrection!" Oh, all Gentiles should be filled with praise and appreciation for God's plan and mercy! What a wonderful thing this is! God did not want the Israelites to stumble and fall, but in His love and mercy, He allowed them to stumble so that salvation would come to the Gentiles.

“I Magnify My Ministry”

Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!
¹³*But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, ¹⁴if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. ¹⁵For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?*

—Romans 11:12–15

WORD STUDY

Up to Romans 11:12–15, much of Paul’s discussion in Romans 9–11 has revolved around his brethren according to the flesh, the nation of Israel. In these verses, he transitions from his discourse on God’s divine plan to statements regarding his own course and labor in line with that plan. He is an apostle to the Gentiles (v. 13) yet labors more earnestly among them with a view to the salvation of his own race (v. 14) (Vincent, 3:125).

Paul writes here, “I magnify my ministry,” so as to move the Jews to jealousy and salvation (vv. 13–14). The Greek word translated “magnify,” *doxazō*, literally means “glorify” (Strong, #1392). It does not indicate praise here, but an honoring by Paul to the duties and office he had been given (Vincent, 3:125).

The Greek word for “ministry,” *diakonia*, comes from the word *diakō*, which means “to run on errands” (Strong, #1249). *Diakonia* can be translated “attendance as a servant; aid or service” (Strong, #1248). In the New Testament, this word is often used in the literal sense of waiting at tables, as an attentive servant or waiter. In a wider sense, the word is also used to indicate the supervision of a meal, that is, the preparation, organization, and provision of the food on the table. G. Kittel writes, “Even the highest Christian office, the preaching of the Gospel, is described as a ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). Probably the original meaning is reflected in this phrase. The Word of God is offered as the bread of life” (Kittel, 2:84–87).

Paul states that Israel’s “rejection” is the reconciliation of the world. This may seem at first to contradict verse 2, in which Paul stated that the Israelites had not been “rejected” by God. However, Paul used a different Greek word in each of these cases. In verse 2, *apōtheō* indicated a pushing or thrusting away from oneself; in verse 15, the word *apobolē* is used, indicating a laying aside or casting away (Vine, 91).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Romans 11 was written regarding God’s economy under His divine sovereignty. Verses 1–10 cover this sovereignty, and verses 11–36 cover God’s economy.

God’s Desire for Fullness

The first thing to see in this section is what God desires—He wants to gain a “fulfillment” or fullness (Strong, #4138). This fullness includes everything in His economy, including both Jews and Gentiles. Remember Paul’s desire for his countrymen in Romans 9:3. On the one hand, he was

earnest for the salvation of the Israelites; on the other hand, he saw that in God's fullness, the Israelites and Gentiles are not separated. Salvation came to the Gentiles because the Israelites had stumbled. When salvation came to the Gentiles, the Israelites were provoked to jealousy. Eventually, whether Israelite or Gentile, all can become part of God's fullness in His mercy. If the transgression of Israel meant riches for the world, and if their failure meant riches for the Gentiles, how much richer will their fullness be! This means that one day, when the Israelites become full, the Gentiles will receive much grace because of them.

A High View of Ministry

Verse 15 says that the acceptance of the Israelites will be life (*zōē*) from the dead. The Greek word used here indicates the life of God (Vine, 367). This divine life is effective, operative, and manifested. If the laying aside of the nation of Israel was the reconciliation of the world, their acceptance indicates the obtaining of God's life. This matches the fulfillment, or fullness, in verse 12. When the Israelites are accepted by God and obtain His divine life, their fullness will bring in the manifestation of God's fullness throughout all the earth.

Paul's ministry was not only for the Gentiles to be reconciled with God (2 Cor. 5:19) but also for the acceptance of the Israelites, resulting in life from the dead (Rom. 11:15). Though Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles, the result of his ministry would bring in the acceptance of the Israelites as well! Paul labored so that both the Gentiles and Israelites would obtain the effective, operative, and manifested divine life.

So whom exactly was Paul an apostle to? The verse says he was an apostle to the Gentiles. Yet he also brought salvation to the Israelites. By bringing salvation to both the Gentiles and Israelites, the two could receive the divine life together.

From our limited point of view, we only serve within our local church, yet from God's point of view, we are serving the body of Christ. From our point of view, we bring individuals to salvation; yet from God's point of view, we are building the corporate body of Christ. We see points in time, yet God sees the totality of all these points. When God chose the Israelites He wanted to gain the Gentiles. When God obtained the Gentiles, He wanted to regain the Israelites. When God called Abraham, He saw not only Abraham but also the nations that would be blessed in him (Gen. 12:3). Likewise, when Paul became an apostle to the Gentiles, not only would the Gentiles be saved, but even the Israelites! We should have such a high and uplifted view of God's economy, knowing that none of our labor in the Lord is in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

Ministry Accomplishes God's Economy

In verse 13, Paul says that he magnifies his ministry. "To magnify" can also be translated "to glorify." The goal of God's economy is to obtain a fullness which includes all things—the Gentiles, the Jews, and all creation. This economy is accomplished by the New Testament ministry. Since Paul's ministry was part of this New Testament ministry, he could boldly glorify his ministry.

The New Testament economy is an economy of oneness. In the process of the fulfillment of this economy, different ministries may have different characteristics, yet all work together as one. From the viewpoint of time, there is a process of God's operation: first the Israelites were chosen, then the Gentiles were saved, and eventually there will be a fullness of the Israelites. From an eternal viewpoint, however, God's operation has already made both the Israelites and Gentiles one.

In time, God must gain people who have their ministry according to His will. God needs servants who allow the New Testament ministry to be constituted in them, so that as one,

they can accomplish His economy. God's economy is realized by the New Testament ministry, which is carried out by many different ministers. Though all ministers have their own ministry, all must be according to the New Testament ministry for God's economy to be accomplished. Thus, all these ministries operate as one.

The Meaning of Ministry

The Greek word translated "ministry," *diakonia*, comes from the word *diakō*, which means "to run on an errand." We can think of this word as describing servants running speedily to fulfill the commitment given to them by their master. Imagine a king holding a very important letter that needs to be sent somewhere quickly. A servant with that letter in hand would earnestly run to deliver it. This would be running according to commitment. God has given us a commitment, and we must rise up to run according to this commitment. This is ministry. God's economy is like the letter, and to the apostle Paul, this commitment was very clear. His commitment, his existence, and his running were all to carry out God's economy. As he earnestly ran according to this commitment, he was fulfilling his ministry.

The word "ministry" was also used to indicate provision of food. This shows the principle that a minister should operate to supply life. No matter how we fulfill our ministry, it should always be according to this principle of supplying life. A servant of the Lord must be committed, must be earnest, must supply life, and must serve others. Those who desire to fulfill their ministry must have a clear commitment, be diligent and earnest, be full of truth, and be able to serve. None of these can be lacking.

The word "ministry" can also mean the service of a waiter at a dining table, which shows that those who desire to fulfill their ministry must be gentle and humble. The food on

the table is like Christ Himself, and we are doing nothing but preparing and presenting Him before people. Our service is related to both the riches of the food and the satisfaction of those who are eating. A good waiter causes people to feel pleasant and satisfied as they are served. Likewise, those who desire to fulfill their ministry must have a gentle and humble character and strive to properly care for and satisfy the saints.

The Nature of Ministry

A proper ministry is not only a matter of committed service. This service should also have a high, heavenly, and glorious nature. The nature of a ministry will match the person and character of the minister. At the same time, ministry should be according to the high, heavenly, and glorious God we serve. Our ministry should have such a glorious nature, yet its nature also matches our constitution and character. Paul understood that his ministry had such a high nature.

There was a big church once where there were many pastors. Each of the pastors drove a Cadillac. A man asked them one day, "Is it really proper for a pastor to drive such a luxurious car?" They answered, "We have a blessing in both the heavens and on earth!" In other words, they used God to cover up their greed. Their problem was not the cars; their problem was their nature.

All who serve and follow the Lord should live as sojourners on earth, abiding in whatever the Lord has measured to them. Whatever the Lord gives is appropriate. Those who desire to truly have a high ministry must realize that earthly blessings mean nothing. Even in need, they must learn to be content with what the Lord gives to them (Phil. 4:11–13). This is the high, heavenly, and glorious nature of those who fulfill their ministry. Their nature becomes so glorious because their life and living is centered around and dependent upon the One in whom is all glory.

True ministry is high because it can never be apart from God. Paul was an apostle established by God, and because he so relied on and trusted in God, his ministry matched this divine, heavenly, and glorious nature. This is why Paul could genuinely glorify his ministry.

Paul was not acting proudly but rather had an assurance regarding his ministry. If we share his view, we will feel that there is no life higher or more glorious than serving the Lord. There is no living that requires a higher nature than that of serving the Lord, because the nature required to serve the Lord is of God. Those who serve the Lord must see that their ministry is glorious, just as the New Testament ministry is glorious.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

In verse 15, the rejection of the Israelites and the ensuing benefits to the Gentiles are compared with God's eventual acceptance of the Israelites. This "rejection" (*apobolē*) is different from the "rejection" (*apōtheō*) in verses 1–2. The rejection of Israel in verses 1–2 meant forcibly pushing them away and expelling them. The rejection in verse 15 indicates removing Israel from a certain union, status, or office, and laying them aside without totally rejecting them. It is this temporary laying aside of the Israelites that allowed the Gentiles to be reconciled to God.

"Reconciling" not only means a change from enmity to friendship but can also indicate the exchange of money (Vine, 513–514). This exchange indicates that the objects in question match each other in value. To be reconciled to God means that we begin to match God. This reconciliation does not only mean the outward peace of friendship, but also that we have obtained from God a high value so as to match Him.

Man was created according to God's image and likeness, meaning that God and man originally matched each other.

Because man sinned and fell, there was no longer a match with God. Today, by the redemption and salvation of the Lord Jesus Christ, God is recovering and uplifting us to match Him. The God who lives in us is the same God who created all things. The divine life within us matches God Himself! This is the lifelong source for us to enjoy Christ as life and to grow in this life. Our value before God is very high! In our reconciliation to God, we enjoy Christ as our life and continually grow in Him!

Romans 5:11 said, “And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.” Reconciliation to God is both a judicial fact and an organic experience. Reconciliation involves our experience of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ coming into us, constituting us, and uplifting us to match God. These experiences are why reconciliation can continually uplift us and become more and more complete as we grow!

Paul’s ministry was to reconcile people in the world to God (2 Cor. 5:18–20). Would any of us say that this was not glorious? No wonder Paul says, “I glorify my ministry!”

The First Fruit and the Lump

If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too.

—Romans 11:16

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used in Romans 11:16 for “lump,” *phurama*, means “a mass of dough.” *Phurama* is the noun form of *phurō*, a verb meaning, “to mix a liquid with a solid” (Strong, #5445).

The term “first piece” comes from the Greek word *aparchē*, which is more commonly translated “first fruits.” The “first fruits” often referred to the first portion of the Israelites’ harvest, which was to be offered to God (see Leviticus 2 and 23). However, this term does not exclusively apply to the harvest; it is also the general term for the first portion of everything offered to God (Vincent, 3:126). Many scholars and commentators say that the first fruits of the lump (as well as the root of the branches) refer to the Jewish patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—while the lump and branches represent Israel (Alford, 2:430–431).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Old and New Testament Lump

God's sovereign economy is altogether related to His work on the Israelites. Paul indicates here that the Israelites were like a lump of dough for God to enjoy.

In the Old Testament, such a lump was used for the grain offering, an offering made so that God and His priests could be satisfied together (Lev. 2:1–3). The lump that was offered was formed by pouring oil into flour. The flour is like people, and the oil is a type of Christ, who has become the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). By obtaining the Lord through faith, we have become such a lump. When Jews gain Christ, they become a lump together with us, a lump that includes both Jews and Gentiles in the mingled life of Christ.

Romans 11:16 says that there is a first piece, or first fruits, of this lump. There is an Old Testament lump and a New Testament lump, although in reality, the two lumps are one. The first fruits of the Old Testament lump refer to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the fathers who are mentioned later in verse 28. They were the first portion of the Old Testament lump that satisfied God. The term “first fruits” also appears in 1 Corinthians 15—“Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep” (v. 20). Christ is the first fruits, followed by all those who are His (v. 23). This is the lump God wants to gain in the New Testament, a lump that includes Jews and Gentiles with Christ as the first fruits. On the one hand, the Jewish patriarchs are the first fruits of Israel; on the other hand, Christ is the first fruits of all believers today.

The Lump Matching the First Fruit

If the first fruit is holy, the lump is also holy (Rom. 11:16). The first fruit is the first portion of the lump. For the Israelites,

this is Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because these three men were holy, the whole testimony of Israel is also holy. This shows that the perfect work of the triune God in the Old Testament was according to His work on Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In spiritual typology, what Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob experienced will eventually become the experience of all Israelites.

Abraham answered God's calling and walked a heavenly route by faith, so the Israelites will do the same. Isaac inherited a possession by faith, a type of the enjoyment of the Lord's complete salvation, so the Israelites will do the same. Jacob was transformed by faith to become Israel, typifying the experience of the many aspects of the Holy Spirit's work, so the Israelites will be transformed also. Today, we who have believed into Christ and are joined to this lump will also have the spiritual experiences portrayed in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Paul's picture here is so good. In the previous verse, he said, "For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (Rom. 11:15). This indicates that the Jews will become participants in the New Testament lump. Christ was the first to be raised from the dead, so He is the first fruits. The pure and unblemished Christ, who is completely one with God, offered Himself to God as a fragrant offering to produce a beautiful lump.

If the first fruit is holy, the lump is also holy. What a salvation! We can boast today that the lump is of the same quality as the first fruit. The Israelites are just as their fathers were, and those in Christ are just as Christ is, whether they are Israelites or Gentiles. Many people have experienced weaknesses, stumbling, and failure. Many have held fast to the Law and even denied the Lord. Yet today, by being in the Lord, they have been accepted by God, made holy, and are part of this new lump.

This lump is truly holy, heavenly, glorious, and full of life. This lump is Christ together with us. Christ is the content, and we are the manifestation. We may have never dreamed that

we could be such a lump with Christ. Our thoughts, our lives, and our testimonies all fall short. Yet Paul indicates here that it is the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that counts, and it is what Christ has accomplished that counts. Christ's work far surpasses our own person, living, and testimony. Since the first fruit is holy, the whole lump is also holy!

What a lump this is! If we truly see this lump, we will be filled with rejoicing, and we will say with excitement, "Hallelujah!" This lump satisfies God and makes Him joyful. It causes the church to be established, brings in the kingdom of God, and causes God's economy to enter into fullness. This lump completely accomplishes the desire of God's heart!

Grafted into the Cultivated Olive Tree

If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too. ¹⁷But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. ²²Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

—Romans 11:16–24

WORD STUDY

The process of grafting generally involves attaching a cultivated branch to a wild tree, in order to cause the wild tree to bear good fruit. However in this metaphor in Romans 11:16–24, the process is reversed—a wild branch (the Gentiles) was grafted into a cultivated tree (the Israelites) to enjoy the richness from the roots. Yet it seems Paul’s main point in this illustration does not focus on the usual process of grafting; rather, in this metaphor, he depicts the benefit received by the wild branch from the tree (Alford, 2:431). Thus, the grafted branches should not glory over the branches that were cut off because they derive their life from the common root (Vincent, 3:127).

In verse 17, Paul speaks of the “rich root of the olive tree.” In the original Greek, the “rich root,” *rhiza tēs piotēs*, can literally be translated “root of the fatness,” meaning that the root is the source of the fatness (Vincent, 3:127). *Piotēs* can be translated “plumpness, richness, fatness” (Strong, #4096).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In this illustration in Romans 11, the Israelites are branches of a cultivated olive tree. The olive tree is related to resurrection. When Noah sent a dove from the ark, a freshly plucked olive leaf was in her mouth when she returned (Gen. 8:11). This was the first sign of life after the death-waters of the flood.

Additionally, the olive tree is related to the Spirit. Olive oil is used throughout the Bible as a type of the Spirit, which can be seen in Zechariah’s vision of the lampstand and olive trees (Zech. 4:1–14), and in the holy anointing oil, which required a hin of olive oil (Exo. 30:22–30).

To be grafted into the cultivated olive tree means that we take part in and experience, by the Spirit, the testimony produced by God in the resurrection of Christ.

The Root, the Branches, and the Richness

The root of this olive tree (Rom. 11:16) symbolizes Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The fact that the root is holy shows that these patriarchs experienced the triune God's sovereign working in His divine economy, and a divine testimony was produced through their experiences. Even if the Israelites were temporarily laid aside, God desires to one day graft them into the tree again.

In this picture, the root is Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the branches are the Israelites, and the richness is Christ. Christ is the life of this olive tree. Though the branches are supported by the root, the vitality of the olive tree comes from Christ as the richness. The Israelites were cut off by their unbelief, and the Gentiles were grafted in by faith to partake of the richness of the olive tree. This partaking will one day be mutual between the Israelites and Gentiles.

Mingling through Grafting

On the day of our salvation, when we were grafted into the cultivated olive tree, we obtained a new life—a grafted life. From a biological standpoint, grafting is for the purpose of producing good fruit. For example, when a branch that produces poor fruit is grafted into a strongly cultivated fruit tree, the result will be juicy and tasty fruit from the branch.

God's focus is on the richness of this cultivated olive tree, the richness of which is Christ Himself. We used to be branches of a wild olive tree, but through grafting, we now partake of the divine richness of this cultivated olive tree. We obtained in salvation the grafted life of Christ. Because man was created according to God's image and likeness, we are able to partake of the divine life through this grafting. This grafting into the cultivated olive tree is God's mercy to us, the wild olive branches, so His life could dwell in us and be lived out through us.

Grafting stresses the mingling of two lives—the life of the branch with the life of the tree. It is not an exchange of one life for another. The wild olive branch does not exchange its life for the life of the tree. Likewise, we are not exchanging a bad life for a better life. Thus in this olive tree, the rich life of the tree is mingled with the wild olive branch. In our case, this means that the divine life unites and mingles with us, resulting in our becoming one with Christ.

When Christ lived on the earth, He lived out the divine life. How does this differ from our experience of living out the divine life? The difference is not in quality but in sequence. Christ passed through death first, and then went through resurrection. We, however, are grafted into His resurrection and learn to experience His death only as we continue to walk with Him. Christ, the grafted life, leads us to learn to die. Those who have many plans for themselves do not want to die. Yet we should tell the Lord, “I only want to enjoy the richness of this olive tree. In Your resurrection, I want to be conformed to Your death.”

Experiencing the Root of the Olive Tree

Verse 17 says that the wild olive branches, grafted into the cultivated olive tree, become partakers of the rich root of the olive tree. On the one hand, Christ is the richness that supplies this olive tree; on the other hand, this supply brings us into the experiences of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These patriarchs were not only the fathers of the Israelites but they are our fathers also (Gal. 3:29; Rom. 9:7).

The lump is for God’s satisfaction and the root of the olive tree is for our enrichment. We partake of the richness of the root, which is Christ Himself. In doing so, we also partake of the root itself. The richness brings us into all the spiritual experiences of the fathers. Just as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were constituted by God, so we also will be.

God's Kindness and Severity

This picture of grafting, especially in verses 18–22, testifies of both God's kindness and severity. To the Israelites who stumbled, God was severe: "they were broken off for their unbelief" (v. 20). To those who continually abide in His kindness, God shows even more kindness: "to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness" (v. 22). We continue in His kindness by faith: "you stand by your faith" (v. 20). If God did not spare the Israelites, He will not spare us either. We must learn to continually abide in His kindness by being continually mingled with Christ in faith.

This Mystery

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; ²⁶and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written,

*“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.”*

*²⁷“This is My covenant with them,
When I take away their sins.”*

²⁸From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. ³²For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.

—Romans 11:25–32

WORD STUDY

Romans 11:29 says, “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” The Greek word used here for “irrevocable,”

ametamelētos, means “without repentance, not to be repented of” (Strong, #278). In other words, God’s gifts and calling are “not subject to recall” (Vincent, 3:130). Martin Luther called this verse “an excellent statement.” He wrote, “God’s counsel (of election and salvation) is altered by no man’s merit or demerit. God never regrets his gift and calling, which He has promised, because the elect are unworthy, and you (the proud, self-righteous Jews) are worthy in your own eyes. He does not change His mind. Hence they (the elect) will surely be converted and come to the truth of faith—salvation without works” (Luther, 163).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

God’s sovereign economy is for the accomplishment of His divine mystery. In order to accomplish this mystery, God is pleased to one day graft the Israelites back into the olive tree. When the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, all of Israel will be saved. We must preach the gospel as much as possible, bring as many people to salvation as possible, and help as many people love the Lord as possible. This will bring the Israelites closer to being grafted in again. The eventual fullness of the Gentiles will be the salvation of all Israel.

Disobedience and Mercy

Romans 11:28–32 shows us the working out of the irrevocable nature of God’s gifts and calling. The Israelites were shut up in disobedience not only so we could obtain mercy but so that all might obtain mercy. God wants to have mercy on all! This causes us to say, “Lord, Your mercy is so great! All things in Your plan are according to Your mercy!”

God’s work is so wonderful! Consider the view we are given: God created us and allowed us to be disobedient so

that we could obtain mercy because of the disobedience of the Israelites. Furthermore, God allowed the Israelites to be disobedient not only for our sakes but that they might eventually obtain the same mercy shown to us. Paul wonderfully describes God's sovereign mercy when he writes, "For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all" (v. 32).

God selected the Israelites in the Old Testament for the purpose of eventually manifesting mercy to the condemned Gentiles. When He selected the Israelites, His sovereignty was expressed and realized through many commandments and laws. Today, however, God saves us through the organic salvation of Christ. The age is different! Today, in this salvation, God's sovereignty is realized not through the Law but in the divine life.

By believing in the Lord Jesus, we Gentiles who lived in sin have received the grace of forgiveness and have experienced God's choice in life to become His children. Through this mercy shown to us and under God's sovereignty, the Israelites, who stumbled in unbelief, will eventually all be saved.

We should cherish how God's economy has been worked out through different ages. In the age of Law, His economy was carried out by His sovereign choice to gain His testimony on the earth. In the age of grace, His economy is carried out by His organic salvation in order to gain the reality of His testimony. What a mercy! This testimony is the church, the body of Christ. The New Testament uses many descriptions for the reality of this testimony, which is constituted by the divine life: His masterpiece, His dwelling place, His kingdom, and His household. God not only supplies grace to us but also shows us mercy to make us, a disobedient people, into the testimony of His life.

To Him Be the Glory

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? ³⁵Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? ³⁶For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

—Romans 11:33–36

WORD STUDY

The expression “Oh” at the start of verse 33, from the Greek word *ō*, was used in exclamations expressing very strong emotion (Rogers, 338). G. Campbell Morgan calls this passage of verses “the outburst of rapturous praise...the result of the apostle’s own consciousness of the wonderful victory of God through Christ over all the opposing forces of evil; and His solution in infinite wisdom of the problems that baffle the intellect of man” (Morgan, 179–180).

M. R. Vincent, quoting F. Godet, wrote, “Like a traveler who has reached the summit of an Alpine ascent, the apostle turns and contemplates. Depths are at his feet, but waves of light illuminate them, and there spreads all around an immense horizon which his eye commands” (Vincent, 3:131).

Finally, H. Alford wrote, “The Apostle, overpowered with the view of the divine Mercy and Wisdom, breaks forth into the sublimest apostrophe existing even in the pages of Inspiration itself” (Alford, 2:437–438).

The Greek word for “counselor” in verse 34, *symbolos*, means “one who consults, i.e. an adviser” (Strong, #4825). It comes from the Greek word *boulē*, which can be translated “counsel, will” (Strong, #1012). In Acts 20:27, the noun *boulē* is used to indicate “all the contents of the divine plan,” while in Ephesians 1:11 it is used of the counsel of God’s eternal will (Thayer, 104–105).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

With the interjection “Oh” in verse 33, Paul begins to praise both God’s divine sovereignty and His divine economy. In verse 33, he marvels at the depths of the riches of God’s knowledge and wisdom. Paul also says that His judgments are unsearchable, and His ways unfathomable. In God’s rich wisdom and knowledge, He also has judgments and ways. It is a picture of a majestic God who is over all and above all things.

Trusting God in All Things

In verse 34, Paul continues with praise for God’s mind and His plan. He speaks of the mind of the Lord and the lack of His need for a counselor—the word “counselor” indicates that a plan is involved. The judgments and ways in verse 33 refer to us, and the mind and plan in verse 34 are for God’s economy. All of the ways God leads us are for the carrying out of His eternal economy.

Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has become His counselor? We often like to advise the Lord. We tell Him, “Lord, why don’t You do something like what I suggest? If You

do this, everything will be fine. Lord, if You had done something like my suggestion yesterday, today's situation would be totally different." The Lord's answer is simple: "Who has known My mind? Who has become My counselor?"

Instead of giving advice to the Lord, we should trust Him in all things. Our thoughts are almost never right, and our plans almost always have problems. Do not be so bold to say, "I know what the Lord will do, and I know how He will lead me!" People are usually wrong when they think something is right. The path people consider as the right one is usually unreliable. We should learn to simply abide in the Lord in all things, and we should learn to say, "Lord, Your judgments are unsearchable! Your ways are past finding out!"

"To Him Be the Glory Forever"

Verses 35–36 are so wonderful. If there were no God, nothing would have value and nothing would be upheld. Nothing would even exist, for "from Him and through Him and to Him are all things."

These verses are a fitting conclusion to chapters 9–11. By this point, Paul has considered God's love, mercy, person, operation, and working. In these, all things are held together and move. This causes Paul to praise God, proclaiming, "to Him be the glory forever."

If we have this understanding regarding God's divine sovereignty, we also will feel that God is so good, so beautiful, so wise, and so full of operation. With such an understanding, we can pray, "Lord, may I fear You and submit myself to Your divine sovereignty my whole life. Nothing I say, do, or decide is trustworthy. I invite You into all parts of my life, so that You would have absolute freedom to sovereignly mold me, work in me, and operate in me. May all the glory be Yours unto eternity! Amen!"

SECTION SEVEN

TRANSFORMATION

An Overview of Transformation

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

—Romans 12:1–2

WORD STUDY

Paul opens Romans 12 with the Greek word *oun*, meaning “therefore.” *Oun* can also be translated “then, accordingly, consequently, these things being so.” It is a conjunction that indicates the necessity of something following from another. It is used in drawing a conclusion and in connecting sentences together logically (Thayer, 463). Exactly what Paul was logically following is not clear. *Oun* may apply to Romans 1–8, to chapters 9–11, to the close of chapter 11, or even to the entirety of chapters 1–11 (Alford, 2:439; Rogers, 338; Thomas, 323).

Whatever previous portion Paul is drawing from, it is clear that he is following it with an “urging,” that is, an exhorting or encouraging. This Greek word translated “urge,”

parakaleō, “was used of exhorting troops who were about to go into battle” (Rogers, 338).

In verse 2, Paul talks about being transformed by the renewing of the mind. The Greek word for “transformed,” *metamorphoō*, means “to change, transfigure, or transform” (Strong, #3339). The root word, *morphoō*, means “form,” and is often used to indicate an inward nature or working, as in Galatians 4:19: “My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed (*morphoō*) in you.” Thus, *metamorphoō* can indicate a change in the inmost nature (Rogers, 339). However, as much as this word may point first to an inner change, the New Testament often uses it to indicate perceptible change. Thus, *metamorphoō* is used in the account of the transfiguration of Jesus, in which His very garments shone (Mark 9:2–3). J. Behm writes, “Above all, what Paul means by transfiguration is not an autonomous, immanent, mystical event. It is a process by which the transcendent eschatological reality of salvation works determinatively in the earthly lives of Christians” (Kittel, 4:759). In other words, transformation deals very much with the practical and moral living of a Christian today.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Sanctification, Transformation, and the Church Life

The section of Paul’s letter to the Romans from 12:1 to 15:13 deals with transformation. This section also describes a healthy church life. Transformation is the outworking of sanctification, and this outworking results in the testimony of a healthy church life. God’s work of justification, sanctification, glorification, and transformation seem to be unto one purpose—the testimony of the church life.

Paul began his letter to the Romans by introducing “the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1). This gospel began with the wrath of God being “revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (v. 18). Yet according to this gospel, God does not condemn us for our sins. Through Jesus Christ, He forgives us, rescues us, and brings us to organic salvation so we can be regenerated, sanctified, and able to live out the reality of sanctification under God’s divine sovereignty. Therefore, Paul begins in chapter 12 to emphasize not only our inner life, but also our outward response after we have seen God, obtained His life, and experienced His sovereign operation. In this context, Paul begins to deal with questions like, “What kind of life should I live in the church? How should I live before the Lord?”

The answers to these questions are found in the experience of transformation, which is the result and outworking of sanctification. Our constitution is dealt with in sanctification, and our outward living is dealt with in transformation. These two go together. Sanctification is unseen, transformation is seen. Together, sanctification and transformation result in our conformation to the image of the Son of God (Rom. 8:29).

God’s organic salvation through sanctification and transformation is not sequential. We do not complete the stage of sanctification before experiencing the stage of transformation. Rather, the inward experience of sanctification is constantly accompanied by an outward manifestation of transformation. Together, they result in our conformation, which then leads to our glorification with the Lord when He comes back.

The Inclusive “Therefore”

At the beginning of this section, Paul uses the word “therefore.” What is he linking the coming thoughts to? Some have said that chapters 9–11 are a separate thought and can

be imagined in parentheses. In this case, the “therefore” may follow the conclusion of chapter 8:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (8:35, 38–39)

Paul’s exhortation to be transformed, then, may be related to our experience of God’s judicial redemption and organic salvation in chapters 1–8. This would imply that the life of Christ, which dwells in us and adds His divine substance and element into us, produces the renewal of our mind and transformation.

However, the “therefore” in 12:1 could instead be related to the close of chapter 11, Paul’s praise of the Lord:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?...For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (11:33–34, 36)

If this is the case, Paul’s “therefore” would be based on God’s sovereignty and sovereign economy in chapters 9–11.

Ultimately though, this “therefore” seems to be inclusive of all eleven chapters. When Paul saw the vastness of God’s judicial redemption and organic salvation in chapters 1–8, and when he saw God’s economy and sovereignty in chapters 9–11, this “therefore” was produced in his heart.

When we see all God has done—whether it be His work in us or His divine and sovereign economy, an urge will be

produced in us. This is just what Paul said. He does not ask us to be transformed, nor does he treat transformation as a passive process; rather, he urges us to be actively transformed by the renewing of our mind. This must be an urge within us, produced by a realization of both the life within us and the divine sovereignty of God over us.

By the Compassions of God

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

—Romans 12:1

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used for “mercies” in Romans 12:1 is *oiktirmōn*, the plural form of the word *oikteirō*, which was also used in Romans 9:15: “For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on (*eleeō*) whom I have mercy (*eleeō*), and I will have compassion on (*oikteirō*) whom I have compassion (*oikteirō*).”

Oikteirō shares a close meaning with the Greek word *eleeō*, which is translated “mercy” in 9:15. However, the two words are slightly different. *Eleēō* means to show compassion or mercy, either in word or in deed (Strong, #1653). *Oikteirō* means to have compassion on, or to exercise pity toward (Strong, #3627). In general, *eleeō* implies a seeking to help someone in need, while *oikteirō* emphasizes being moved inwardly (Rogers, 333). This verse could be translated, “I urge you, brethren, by the compassions of God....” This is important because the translation “mercy” may emphasize

God's dealing with man in his wretched nature, while the translation "compassion" may emphasize God's inward feeling (Vincent, 3:104).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Where does a transformed living begin? It begins with the presentation of our bodies as "a living and holy sacrifice." Such a sacrifice is made possible only by God's mercy and compassion.

God's Mercy and Compassion

There are two important words in the Bible that deal with similar matters: mercy (*eleos*) and compassion (*oiktirmos*). Mercy implies outward action, while compassion is an inward feeling of sympathy. God is full of both mercy and compassion for us. Even when we fall, fail, or are weak, God in His mercy rescues us and raises us up. In this process we may feel, "Lord, how can You still love me in these situations? Why do You still visit me? Why are You still with me?" God still loves us, visits us, and abides with us because of His compassion.

Mercy is what God grants us when we cannot match His grace. We may say, "Lord, give me grace!" God may give grace to us, yet we may still feel unable to match it. We may pray again, "Lord, do not only give me grace, but also mercy. Have mercy on me, Lord!" God's compassion is different than His mercy. His compassion is the lovingkindness, sympathy, and tenderness He has for us deep within Himself.

On the one hand, we should say to the Lord, "It is by Your mercy I can go on. It is only by Your mercy that I can pursue You, consecrate myself to You, and forsake all other things to be one with You." On the other hand, we should realize in the midst of such a process that the Lord's mercy is not simply

His having pity on us. His mercy is given to us in His compassion. He is full of tender emotions, care, and love for us. He does not coldly grant us mercy; rather, He loves us to the uttermost. We should not only cherish the mercy of God but also realize how much compassion is behind this mercy!

The Compassions of God for Our Transformation

The “compassion” in Romans 12:1 is plural—the “compassions” of God. God’s compassions are not a one-time thing for a single experience. Rather they are for many experiences and have many aspects. Praise the Lord for His compassions for us! These compassions are shown by His coming to us in many ways and situations. Sometimes we are fearful, yet He stoops down to visit us. Sometimes we are unrighteous; still He stoops down to visit us. Sometimes we live by our flesh instead of His Spirit. Even then, He stoops down to visit us. God is full of compassion toward us.

Paul said in the beginning of 12:1, “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God.” Paul could speak this because he had experienced the compassions of God. This should be the experience of all Christians as they grow in life. When we follow the Lord, we need grace, mercy, and compassion from God in many ways and in many aspects. The compassions of God are essential to our experience of transformation. In fact, all of God’s transformation work in us is the result of His inward compassions for us.

Presenting Our Bodies

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

—Romans 12:1

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used in Romans 12:1 for “present,” *paristēmi*, has a wide range of meanings (Strong, #3936) and is the same word used to indicate the presenting of a Levitical sacrifice or offering (Vincent, 3:153). The Greek word literally means “to place beside or near; to set at hand.” This could indicate placing a person or thing at one’s disposal, or presenting a person for another to see and question. Along these lines, the word can also mean “to stand beside, to be at hand,” referring either to common bystanders or to servants attending their master (Thayer, 489).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Here, at the beginning of Romans 12, Paul seems to be moving forward yet again. He had talked about the gospel

of God and how it works in and upon people (Rom. 1–8). He had also discussed the sovereign economy of the gospel of God (Rom. 9–11). Now he is beginning to talk about how the gospel of God can be lived out of us, how it can become our reality, and how it can become a blessing for both God and the church.

Many Bodies, One Sacrifice

For our transformation, the first thing Paul urges us to do, by the compassions of God, is to present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice. This presentation only happens because of God’s compassions, and it is realized in our action of presenting our physical bodies.

The presented bodies are plural, but the sacrifice is singular. This is a picture of the corporate church life. Many saints, all with physical bodies, present themselves together as one consecrated sacrifice. Such a picture shows that this sacrifice is not something we can do on our own, apart from other saints. At the same time, it shows us God’s desire regarding the church—that we might become a corporate sacrifice to please Him.

Standing with the Lord

To our thought, this presentation is a high demand requiring us to grit our teeth to accomplish. The Greek word Paul uses for “present” here is *paristēmi*, which he also used in 2 Timothy: “At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood (*paristēmi*) with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion’s mouth” (4:16–17). The Lord’s standing with Paul is

described using the same Greek word as Paul uses for “present” in this verse in Romans. When Paul presented himself to the Lord and stood with Him, the Lord also stood with Paul. This is so sweet!

This Greek word should be a comfort, encouragement, and protection to us. When the Lord stood with Paul, He was his comfort, his encouragement, and his protection. Everything related to Paul would be fine, since the Lord was with him. If we understand the presenting in Romans 12:1 in this way, we will realize that true consecration is simply standing with the Lord. In true consecration, what is profitable to the Lord becomes profitable to us, His desires become our own, and we even become His comfort and encouragement. This consecration to the Lord and standing with Him is the result of His compassions for us.

Toward the end of the 2002 World Cup, there were many South Korean flags waving in their streets. This was because their team had entered the final four. These flags showed that the Koreans were standing with their team. This is a picture of “presenting.” Christians should have the feeling, “Lord, I really want to stand with You! I want what You want! What You want to accomplish is the reality and purpose of my existence.”

God’s desire for the church is that she would become a testimony standing with Him and becoming His satisfaction. We cannot present ourselves to the Lord on our own. The greatest self-effort in the world will not qualify as a living sacrifice in God’s presence. We need two things. First, we need God’s compassions. We can only stand with the Lord by the compassions of God. Second, we need to be with other saints. It is many bodies that make one living sacrifice.

This presentation is not cold; it is full of feeling. It is not accomplished by firm resolution, gritting our teeth, and saying, “Alright, I must consecrate myself to God now!” Rather, true consecration is full of emotion, feeling, and glory. But if it is not a matter of our willpower, how is such a consecration

drawn out of us? Based on this verse, it is only by God's compassions that we become willing to stand with the Lord.

The Lord Standing with Us

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he said, "But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me" (2 Tim. 4:17). The moment we present ourselves to God and stand with Him is also the moment He presents Himself to us and stands with us. This is very sweet! When we say, "Lord, all I have is Yours. I am willing to stand with You," the Lord will also say, "You have presented yourself to Me, so I also present Myself to you. From now on I am responsible for you and will stand with you."

In Romans 12:1, Paul seems to be saying, "I want to urge you by God's compassions. I want you to know how good, rich, enjoyable, and glorious God's compassions are, and how much support, comfort, encouragement, and strength they give to us." Paul's testimony in 2 Timothy shows that he had experienced and enjoyed these compassions of God. Only by such an experience could he so strongly urge the believers to live a life of presenting themselves and standing with God for His benefit. Paul's own testimony illustrates that when we stand with God in this way, He will surely stand with us.

A Living Sacrifice

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

—Romans 12:1

WORD STUDY

In Romans 12:1, Paul’s urging of the brethren in Rome was for a purpose—that they would present their bodies “a living and holy sacrifice.” As we saw in chapter 167, the Greek word for “present” was used to indicate the offering of a Levitical sacrifice (Vincent 3:153). The word “sacrifice,” then, would evoke the image of Levitical offerings and sacrifices burned on the altar. However, these sacrifices were slain animals, whereas Paul’s exhortation is to become a living sacrifice. H. Alford wrote that it is by the death of the Lord Jesus and the shedding of His blood that we are now able to be sacrifices offered to God in our living and walking on earth (Alford, 2:440).

Paul also explains that this presenting of ourselves is our “spiritual service of worship.” This is translated from the Greek phrase *logikos latreia*. The second word, *latreia*, indicates divine service or ministration of God and can also

be translated “worship” (Strong, #2999). Thus, the New American Standard Bible translates it as, “service of worship.” The first word, *logikos*, is best translated “reasonable;” it is derived directly from the Greek word *logos* and can also be translated “of the word” (Strong, #3050). To most English speakers, “reasonable” may carry the thought of “befitting” or “proper,” but *logikos* actually means “rational.” This “spiritual service of worship” is a “reasonable service,” not because it is “proper,” but because it is based on an inward decision made in harmony with the highest reason (Vincent, 3:154).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

When we present our bodies to God and stand with Him, we will become, along with the saints around us, a living sacrifice that is holy, acceptable, and satisfying to God.

A Sweet Fragrance

In the Old Testament, the offerings that were burned on the altar produced a “soothing aroma to the Lord” (Lev. 1:9). The phrase here in Romans 12:1, “living and holy sacrifice,” indicates our experience of spiritual tribulation—being burnt to ashes and becoming a sweet fragrance to God. If we stand with God and are willing to allow Him to deal with us, to burn us, and to carve us, we will surely experience many tribulations. Consider the apostle Paul, who said, “I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (2 Cor. 11:27). He experienced honor and dishonor, evil report and good report, was true and yet considered a deceiver (2 Cor. 6:8). We will also experience such things in a life full of tribulations. These experiences are not meant to frustrate us but to make us a sweet fragrance to God.

Sacrifices in the Old Testament were slaughtered first, then laid on the altar, and finally burnt to ashes. In the New Testament, we are a living and holy sacrifice.

First, we are living. We are always burning, yet are never completely consumed or dried up. We should not burn only for a moment but for as long as we follow the Lord. The coals within us must be kept burning strongly and continuously. This experience of being burnt as a sacrifice will continue until the day we see the Lord.

Second, we are holy. We are a living sacrifice today in the midst of many people. By presenting our bodies to the Lord, our life becomes different from other people's lives. Others can live for many different purposes, yet our life can be for only one purpose: to become a living sacrifice and sweet fragrance to satisfy God.

Experiencing Christ's Death in Resurrection

In the Old Testament age, the offered sacrifices were first slaughtered and then burned, so we can consider them dead sacrifices. In the New Testament age, we apply the death of Christ in His resurrection (Phil. 3:10). We are not a dead sacrifice but one that is living! We cannot be this sacrifice individually or by our own effort. We must be related to the saints and the resurrected Christ, allowing His death to work in us even as we abide in His resurrection.

We are a living sacrifice experiencing the process of God's burning, carving, dealing, and striking. However, this process can be very sweet because through it, we "may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Phil. 3:10). How can we enter the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ? How can we be conformed to His death? It is by experiencing His death in His resurrection.

It is while we abide in His resurrection that we experience spiritual tribulation as His death works upon us. Those who do not know how to live in the resurrection of Christ or how to enjoy and apply His resurrection life will never become such a sacrifice with the saints.

Our Reasonable Service

The presentation of ourselves as a living sacrifice is only realized in resurrection. This presentation is related to God, is holy, is in one accord with God, and is acceptable to God. This presenting is also a service. Paul says that it is our “spiritual service of worship” or “reasonable service” (*logikos latreia*).

True service is not just a one-time action; rather, it is a life of standing with God. If we stand with God, we serve Him. Becoming a living sacrifice is a matter of our life and living, and this is our reasonable service.

In Greek, the root word for “reasonable” (*logikos*) is *logos*, which is used for the word of God that expresses the nature, character, and taste of God’s economy. The word (*logos*) is living and active (Heb. 4:12). Thus, “reasonable” does not just indicate what our mind can comprehend. It also indicates the supply of divine life (the “living” *logos*) and a powerful operation (the “active” *logos*). Many things we do can be in the realm of religious service, but service generated by and according to the *logos* is reasonable. “Reasonable service” not only means logical service, but also service in which the word of God nourishes us, empowers us, and produces an operation in us.

“Service” (*latreia*) also means “worship,” and especially indicates the priestly service. This service belongs to God and has a godly character. It is also in Christ, and in Christ, it supplies God to people and presents people to God. This is the priestly service of the New Testament (1 Pet. 2:5).

Service is related to the supply, growth, and building of life. The apostle Peter had this view. He said, “Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation....You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:2, 5). By regeneration, we are born as spiritual babies and must grow in life unto salvation by the nourishment of the pure milk of the word. All service to help believers grow involves the nourishment of the word. Ultimately, this growth is unto the spiritual house and holy priesthood built up by God.

The Renewing of Our Mind

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

—Romans 12:2

WORD STUDY

Within Romans 12:2 is a contrast between conformation to the world and transformation by the renewing of the mind. The Greek word used here for “conformed,” *suschēmatizo*, means “to fashion alike, or conform to the same pattern” (Strong, #4964). A similarly translated Greek word, *summorphizō*, is used to indicate a conformation to that which is essential in character, not merely a form or outline (as in Romans 8:29). However, the Greek word in this verse (*suschēmatizo*) is used to indicate an external conformity only, and cannot be used of inward transformation (Vine, 122). Thus, “conformed to this world” is an outward, not inward, fashioning. In contrast, the Greek word for “transformed,” *metamorphoō*, indicates a change in the inmost nature, resulting in a perceptible change in practical living today (Rogers, 339; Kittel, 4:758–759).

The Greek word for “world,” *aiōn*, means “age” (Strong, #165). This could indicate the wicked or ungodly world to

which this age belongs, which is a world full of error and hostile to the gospel (Thayer, 19). The devil, Satan, is portrayed in the Bible as the ruler of this present age (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; Matt. 4:8–9).

The Greek word used here for “renewing,” *anakainoō*, literally means “renovation” (Strong, #341). The word is composed of *ana*, which means “up,” but when used as a prefix also indicates repetition or reversal (Strong, #303), and *kainos*, meaning “new.” *Kainos* does not denote “new” in terms of age but in terms of freshness or quality (Strong, #2537). Thus, this renewal, or renovation, indicates a fresh mind, rather than a recently formed new mind. The dative case used in this verse indicates that the renewing of the mind is the means by which transformation takes place (Wallace, 729–730).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Transformation is the outward manifestation of sanctification and results in the testimony of a healthy church life. By God’s compassions, transformation leads to the presentation of our bodies. This presentation makes us a living and holy sacrifice that is acceptable to God. This living sacrifice involves our whole life and is our reasonable service. To arrive at such a wonderful result, we should ask how we can be transformed. Paul’s direction seems to be that transformation begins with a fundamental change in us, produced by the renewing of our mind.

Conformation versus Transformation

In this verse, Paul speaks of not being “conformed to this world” and instead, being “transformed by the renewing of

of your mind.” Conformation is the imitation of an outward pattern. Transformation is the change of both inward nature and outward appearance. These are similar, yet opposing, words.

What are the differences between imitation and transformation in this verse? Firstly, imitation focuses on an outward form and not on inner content. Transformation, however, focuses on both. Secondly, this imitation is temporary and produced by man. Transformation is eternal and is the work of God upon us. Thirdly, imitation is changeable, as seen in popular fashion trends that are always changing. The result of transformation, however, is unchangeable. God’s work upon us can never be altered. Finally, imitation emphasizes a popular appearance and fashion. Transformation is an expression or testimony resulting from an inward change.

Transformation is the living out of our inner sanctification. When we notice that people have changed, it is usually their living that is different. This is transformation, which emphasizes our testimony and living. We not only have the sanctifying life within us, but we also have a transformed outward living because of this life.

A transformed living includes not becoming conformed to the world. The “world” here is not *kosmos* in Greek but *aiōn* (age), a segment of the world system of Satan. The world is composed of many ages and is an organized system. Each age is the current part of the world, which has been organized and systematized by Satan.

Many things rule over people in this age. Consider even clothing trends: for a certain time, it was popular for women to wear very revealing clothing. Whoever refused to dress in such a way was looked down upon by others. Although the things of the age are superficial, shallow, and valueless, they can firmly control a person’s life. Therefore, Paul urged us not to be conformed to this age but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind.

New Eyesight

What does it mean to have a renewed mind? Simply speaking, it means to see things with the eyesight of the Lord. A person whose mind has been renewed sees things in a different way. Many things can seem logical, but God's view is not always according to natural logic. Many things may seem necessary, but neither is God's view always according to what seems necessary. People often live by their natural logic, so a person's mind must be renewed to live a transformed life. An unrenewed mind, even in those who love the Lord, will cause people to live, make decisions, and plan according to their natural thoughts and logic.

When I came from Taiwan to the United States years ago, I only had one hundred dollars. At that time, many immigrants were trying to get part-time jobs at restaurants to make some money. Everyone was doing their best to make a living and were pressured by the considerations of how to earn enough money to survive. Yet by the Lord's mercy, my mind had been somewhat renewed before coming to the United States. I knew I needed to study and find a part-time job, but I also understood that my purpose on the earth was to love the Lord. I was not on the earth for money or comfort, but to love the Lord!

With a renewed mind, my decisions were different. I did not live for money, education, or work. My considerations were where to find brothers, where I could meet with saints, where I could preach the gospel, and where I could pursue the Lord. The first place in my heart belonged to Christ, His church, the gospel, meeting with believers, and loving the Lord. Only after these matters were taken care of would I begin to consider other things.

At that time, I began to contact many Christians. If I met a brother in one city, I would go to have fellowship with him. If I knew another brother in another city, I also went to have fellowship with him. Unconsciously, I grew to know and

serve many saints and had very good and intimate fellowship with them. This fruit was produced by the renewal of my mind and diligent labor.

Organic Renewal

The root of the Greek word for “renewing” is *kainos*, meaning new in quality, better, and more wonderful. Renewal is related to our essence; it is the renovation of our very nature. Renewal brings in something better, more wonderful, exciting, and full of joy! It is full of the feelings of energy and excitement!

Renewal is not theoretical or based on logic but is practical and carried out organically. For example, a brother may watch too many movies. For him to be freed from movie watching, his mind needs to be renewed. People can argue logically with him, saying things like, “Watching so many movies has a low value. They are so long and are so expensive. Plus, it is better to go outside and get some exercise!” They could have the best logic, but the better way is if he himself loses interest in movies. Rather than being argued out of a habit, it is so much better if he himself wakes up by the organic renewal of his mind. This renewal happens as the divine life continually adds into him heavenly and divine elements. As long as this brother is in fellowship with the saints and enjoying the life of Christ, we can trust that the Lord will renew his mind.

By the operation and working of God’s life, our minds can become fresh and totally different from other people’s. This renewal is so wonderful!

Proving What the Will of God Is

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

—Romans 12:2

WORD STUDY

In Romans 12:2, after speaking of being “transformed by the renewing of your mind,” Paul writes, “so that.” The Greek word used here, *eis*, means “unto” and “expresses the purpose or result” (Rogers, 339). In other words, transformation allows us to prove what the will of God is.

The Greek word used here for “prove,” *dokimazō*, means “to test...by implication to approve” and can also be translated “discern, examine, like, approve, prove, try” (Strong, #1381). This proving is an examining to see whether something is genuine or not, or whether it is worthy of selection (Thayer, 154). Thus, to prove the will of God is to examine, discern, and test this will.

The verse describes the will of God as good, acceptable, and perfect. The Greek word for “acceptable,” *euairestos*, means “fully agreeable, well-pleasing” (Strong, #2101). The Greek word for “perfect,” *teleios*, means “complete (in various

applications of labor, growth, mental and moral character, etc.)” (Strong, #5046) or “mature” (Vine, 466).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

A Proving Process

The purpose of transformation, which is the result of the renewal of our mind, is to prove what the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God is. “Proving” can be described as examining and choosing something based on observation and testing. For example, many high school seniors visit different colleges and universities over the course of the year. They and their parents look at university after university, comparing and testing each one. Eventually one is chosen. This is a proving process.

God’s will also requires examination and a choosing based on observation and testing. This proving requires us to pursue the will of God, pay a price for it, and be attracted by it. For our whole life, our following of the Lord is a process of continually pursuing and proving the will of God.

The Perfect and Acceptable Will of God

God’s will is good, acceptable, and perfect. “Perfect” is a rich word, indicating the result brought in by every positive process. Our transformation is to prove what is God’s perfect, intact, mature, real, consummated, and complete will. Man’s will falls short of this. It is so wonderful that God’s will is a perfect will!

“Acceptable” means something pleasing and giving joy. When we see the good, pleasing, and joy-giving will of God, we adapt to be one with it. For example, by seeing the will of God, a desire may be produced in us to wake up earlier

every morning to come to the Lord, enter His presence, see His face, and hear His speaking. Or, by seeing the will of God, we may adapt our schedules to spend more time with other saints to be strengthened by the fellowship. When we see God's acceptable will, we become willing to live a sanctified life to pursue God so that we match His will.

Thinking so as to Have Sound Judgment

For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. ⁴For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

—Romans 12:3–5

WORD STUDY

Greek scholars are quick to point out Paul’s play on the word *phroneō* (meaning, “to think”) and its compounds in Romans 12:3. M. R. Vincent translates the second part of verse 3 in the following way: “Not to be high-minded (*hyperphroneō*) above what he ought to be minded (*phroneō*), but to be minded (*phroneō*) unto the being sober-minded (*sōphroneō*)” (Vincent, 3:154). The literal translation from the Greek text does not contain the words “of himself” in the phrase “more highly of himself,” although the Greek word, *hyperphroneō*, hints of thoughts about oneself (Alford, 2:441).

The Greek word used in verse 3 for “sound judgment,” *sōphroneō*, literally means “to be of sound mind, that is, sane”

(Strong, #4993). The word implies the use of sense and reason to keep the proper measure and to not go beyond the set boundaries (Rogers, 339).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In Romans 12, Paul talks mainly about the church life, and as he begins to introduce this subject, he emphasizes our minds and thinking. First, he encouraged us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice (v. 1). Second, we should be transformed by the renewing of our mind, so that we can prove what the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God is (v. 2). In this passage, Paul continues to focus on our way of thinking.

Our Way of Thinking

In verse 3, Paul says, “I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think.” According to the literal Greek, there is no “of himself” in this verse. We should not think more highly of anyone than we ought to think. We must properly recognize this step in our process and experience of transformation.

“To think more highly” (*hyperphroneō*) is composed of *hyper*, meaning “over, beyond, more than” (Strong, #5228) and *phroneō*, meaning “to exercise the mind” (Strong, #5426). This kind of thinking is an evaluation that overly esteems either ourselves or others. Why would Paul warn against this? If we think of ourselves more highly than we ought to, we will easily become proud. If we think of others more highly than we ought to, we will quickly form a faction in the church, much like the Corinthians did (1 Cor. 1:10–14).

Paul is not only addressing our thoughts regarding ourselves, but even our thoughts about others. Both the pride and self-abasing that can enter the church life come from

improper thinking of ourselves (1 Cor. 12:15–21). The forming of factions and exclusion of others come from improper thinking regarding other saints. If we think with a sound mind and with proper boundaries, we will not become prideful or form factions.

In the church life, our thoughts are extremely important. Where do the factions in the church come from? They mostly come from our thinking of a brother more highly than we ought to think. If we want to experience transformation, we should not think beyond what we ought to think but should think according to the grace the Lord has given to us.

Sometimes we feel that a brother is like Judas Iscariot, who betrayed the Lord. However, is the brother really so bad? Sometimes we feel that a brother is like the apostle Paul. However, is the brother really so good? Thinking of others in such extreme ways is actually much more serious than thinking too highly of ourselves. High thoughts about ourselves only damages us, making us proud, independent, and isolated from fellowship. Thinking too highly of others can lead to factions, which damages the church life. We must learn to think properly, not more highly than what we ought to think.

Our natural mind apart from God is not sound. Therefore, the Greek word for “sound judgment” shows that those in the church life who think soberly have been rescued out of their natural mind to think with a sound mind. Paul’s introduction to the topic of the church life is not in the way we think of spiritual things. Rather, he stresses the importance of our mind. Our mind should be rescued out of its natural state to have sober and sound judgment. Without this experience, it is impossible for us to have a proper church life.

A Measure of Faith

The second part of verse 3 says that God has allotted to each person a measure of faith. We should realize that the

measure of each one's faith is different and that each person receives a different portion from the Lord. Such a realization should not only affect our consideration of others but also our sober thoughts regarding the portion and measure the Lord has dealt to us.

What does it mean that God has "allotted to each a measure of faith"? It means that God has carefully given each saint the ability to trust and believe in Him. Everyone's trust in God is different. However, everyone's measure of faith can grow, and every saint's degree of maturity is proportional to their measure of faith.

A Matter of the Spirit

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul wrote of a "spirit of discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). This "discipline" has the same Greek root as "sound judgment" in Romans 12:3. A better way to translate 2 Timothy 1:7 is that God has given us "a sober spirit." This shows that being sober is related to the spirit and is the result of the operation of the Holy Spirit.

How well we know the Spirit of God is the first condition related to our ability to have sober and sound judgment in all things. Then, our sound judgment is based on how rich, healthy, and proper our spirit is. The healthy operation of the Spirit of God in our spirit will cause our thinking to be sober and sound.

One Body in Christ

Romans 12:4–5 seems to be a sudden introduction to the concept of the body of Christ, but this is actually very much related to verse 3. Realizing that Christ has only one body prevents us from comparing ourselves to other believers, whether past or present. There is only one body of Christ

in the universe, which includes many members, even the apostles Paul, Peter, and John. It includes us today, yet it also includes the common saints of past generations and all the saints alive today! Within the body of Christ are many members with many different functions. We are sometimes caught by comparing ourselves to others, but we do not need to do this. Comparing ourselves to the apostles, Martin Luther, Madame Guyon, John Wesley, or to one another is a product of improper thoughts.

The members of the body exist for one another. We exist for our brothers and sisters in Christ, and they exist for us. We become a supply for the brothers and sisters we are with, and they become our support. There is a mutual blessing among all the brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. We who are many have become one body in Christ and individually members one of another. The realization of such a wonderful truth is the result of proper, sound, and sober thinking.

The Gifts according to Grace (1)

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; ⁷if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching.

—Romans 12:6–7

WORD STUDY

From the image of the body of Christ made up of many members, Paul moves on in Romans 12:6–7 to talk about gifts. The Greek word used here for “gifts,” *charisma*, is plural, indicating the different spiritual endowments of believers in the church (Vine, 264). H. Alford wrote that the aim of this passage is not merely to catalogue various gifts but to encourage each member of the body to stay true to the place and work they have been given, without boasting against any other member (Alford, 2:442).

The first three gifts mentioned are prophecy (*prophētia*), ministry (*diakonia*), and teaching (*didaskō*). Of prophecy, M. R. Vincent wrote, “The prominent idea [of prophecy] is not prediction, but the inspired delivery of warning, exhortation, instruction, judging, and making manifest the secrets of the heart. [Prophets spoke] under direct divine

inspiration” (Vincent, 3:156). The word “prophecy” in Greek, *prophētia*, is composed of the words *pro*, meaning “before, in front of” (Strong, #4253) and *phēmi*, which is from the Greek word *phaō*, meaning “to bring forth into the light.” Hence, *phēmi* properly means “to make known one’s thoughts, to declare, to say” (Thayer, 651). This picture of speaking and light indicates that prophecy is an utterance of the prophet’s conscious intelligence, informed by the light of the Holy Spirit (Alford, 2:129).

The Greek word used here for “service,” *diakonia*, comes from the word *diakō*, meaning, “to run on errands” (Strong, #1249). *Diakonia* can be translated, “attendance as a servant; aid or service; ministry” (Strong, #1248). In the New Testament, this word primarily means waiting at table as an attentive servant or waiter. In a wider sense, the word was also used to indicate the supervision of a meal, that is, the preparation, organization, and provision of the food on the table (Kittel, 2:84–87).

Finally, the Greek word used here for “teaching,” *didaskō*, means “instruction, either the act or the content” (Strong, #1319). According to K. Rengstorf, there are two aspects indicated by this Greek word—the insight of the one to be instructed, and the knowledge that is in the teacher. In relation to the second aspect, especially when it is a question of practical arts and crafts, the teacher’s example forms a bridge to the knowledge and ability of the pupil (Kittel, 2:135).

Revelation and Application

As Paul begins to consider the church life in Romans 12, he speaks of gifts in verse 6. These gifts are according to the grace God has given to us and can be described as gifts of life operating in grace (see chapter 70). After the divine life enters us, becomes our enjoyment, and supplies us for further growth, this life produces differing spiritual skills and

abilities. These gifts are all gifts of life that develop and grow in the realm of grace.

The Gift of Prophecy

In Romans 12:6, the first gift according to grace is prophecy. This shows that the health of our church life is strongly linked to rich prophecy. Prophecy (*prophētia*) is generated by first having light and then speaking for the Lord. The gift of prophecy not only includes an outward manifestation but also emphasizes an inward nature that is related totally to God and His light. Prophesying is not merely speaking. It involves experiencing the shining of God's light and receiving revelation within that light.

Most people understand prophesying to be a predicting of something in the future. However, the Greek word implies a three step process: first seeing the light, then a revelation being produced by that light, and finally speaking something for the Lord according to that revelation. Receiving light from the Lord is related to the measure of maturity in life. The richer the divine life is in those who speak for the Lord, the stronger their light will be. The more mature they are in the divine life, the higher the revelation will be that they receive, and the more it will be related to God and His will. God is light (1 John 1:5) and desires to be announced by and through us. When light comes to us to be spoken out in revelation, it is called "prophecy."

Paul says that this gift of prophecy should be exercised "according to the proportion of [our] faith" (Rom. 12:6). Prophesying cannot be separated from the proportion of our faith. This faith is related to who we are in Christ. The more we are constituted with Christ, the greater our proportion of faith will be, and the more we can richly utter what we have obtained. Ultimately, how much we can speak for the Lord is determined by our proportion of faith.

There was a group of young men who would imitate the way Watchman Nee spoke. However, some of the saints who listened to these young brothers felt embarrassed for them. Why did the speaking of these young men cause some people to feel this way? It was because of their proportion of faith. The words were Watchman Nee's words, and the style of speaking was his style, but their faith did not match his. When Watchman Nee gave a message, everyone could say "Amen!" But when these young people spoke the same points, their listeners felt something was lacking and wrong.

This illustrates how closely prophesying is related to our proportion of faith. A healthy prophecy is not a recitation of spiritual words. It is related to the maturity of those who speak, the proportion of their faith, and the riches of their revelation.

The Gift of Service

The second gift mentioned by Paul is serving or ministering. Ministry, like prophecy, is somewhat misunderstood today. A minister is not only the person who speaks at every church gathering. Actually, a minister is a servant. In a healthy church life, there should not only be those who speak for the Lord but also many ministers who are able to serve. Do not look down on ministers. The whole spiritual ecology of a church can quickly become healthy because of a saint who becomes a minister.

A healthy church has many practical needs that require the service of people. However, a servant who is according to God's heart not only takes care of these many practical things but also supplies Christ to others in the process of serving. The nature of a true ministry is not just related to the work that is done but to God Himself. Healthy service in the church is not solely doing things well but also dispensing life in the process.

The Gift of Teaching

Verse 7 mentions not only prophecy and service but also teaching. Teaching is crucial. There are not many in the church today who are able to teach according to the needs of the saints so that they can receive proper perfecting and feeding. This may be because of a lack of proper learning. Teachers can only teach what they have truly learned. Simply reading others' material is not enough. To be a true teacher involves personally experiencing and learning spiritual things.

According to some Greek scholars, the Greek word used here, *didaskō*, not only expresses theoretical teaching and learning but also involves practical knowledge. The way that this teaching is accomplished is not only by orally reciting something but by expressing something possessed inwardly. When a brother speaks for the Lord, his words reveal his very person. When some try to teach and speak for the Lord, there is a great distance between their person and their words. Their person has not become a bridge for spiritual things to become real and applicable. The process of teaching utterly exhibits a person's inner being and character.

Teaching is also related to those who are listening. The word of the Lord should produce practical and subjective experiences in them. Valuable teaching before God cannot remain theoretical. It is not apart from the one who teaches, and it must never be for the sake of teaching alone. If spiritual teachers are for their own teaching and not for the hearers, their teaching will eventually produce a sect. The purpose of teaching is so those who listen could receive spiritual riches, be perfected, learn to function, and develop an operation. To this end, the words of teaching and the person who teaches must be in one accord. Only this kind of teaching can accomplish God's eternal will.

The Gifts according to Grace (2)

Or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

—Romans 12:8

WORD STUDY

In Romans 12:8, Paul continues his encouragement to believers to function according to the gifts they have received. The four gifts mentioned here are exhorting, giving, leading, and showing mercy. The first, “exhortation,” is translated here from the Greek word *paraklēsis*, which can also be translated “comfort, consolation” (Strong, #3874). It is derived from the Greek word *parakaleō*, meaning “to call near, to invite, or to invoke by imploring, exhorting, or consoling” (Strong, #3870). The verse reads, “He who exhorts (*parakaleō*), in his exhortation (*paraklēsis*).” While *parakaleō* may often indicate addressing or speaking to someone, the first sense of the word is calling someone to one’s side (Thayer, 482).

There is a slight difference between Paul’s statements regarding the first four gifts and his statements regarding the last three. All of the gifts are “according to the grace given to us,” but for the last three, Paul indicates how the gift is to

be used (Morgan, 195–196). The exercise of the gift of giving should be with liberality, leading with diligence, and mercy with cheerfulness.

The Greek word used here for “gives,” *metadidōmi*, implies the sharing of earthly possessions with another (Vincent, 3:157). It is to be exercised with “liberality,” *haplotēs*, meaning “sincerely, generously, in simplicity;” it refers to the giving of open hands and hearts from compassion and simplicity, without any ambitious motives (Rogers, 339).

The phrase “he who leads” can literally be translated “he that is placed in front” and implies one who watches over others, as opposed to one placed above others (Vincent, 3:158). This leading is to be done with “diligence,” *spoudē*, meaning “haste, eagerness, earnestness, carefulness” (Strong, #4710).

He “who shows mercy” is one who exhibits compassion toward others (Alford, 2:443). The Greek word used here for “cheerfulness,” *hilarotēs*, can also be translated “propitious” and signifies a readiness of mind to do anything, not out of compulsion but out of joy (Vine, 98).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

We who are many are one body in Christ and have become members one of another (Rom. 12:5). We have also all received gifts that differ according to the grace of God. Some exhort, some give, some lead, and some show mercy to others.

Exhorting with Tenderness

Following the three gifts in Romans 12:7, verse 8 starts with “he who exhorts.” This exhorting, from the Greek word *parakaleō*, means to call someone to our side. This means that when we exhort someone, our exhorting is actually a calling in which there is beseeching, comforting, and teaching.

“Exhorting” is a rich word full of tender emotion. In this calling of another, there is not only words but also encouragement and strengthening. This helps others revive and become joyful, even in the midst of difficult situations and experiences.

When exhorting others, we should not condemn them. We should not say, “Brother, you went gambling again? You are a horrible Christian!” This is not a comforting and beseeching exhortation. When a brother goes gambling, he will already feel sad and condemned. Why should we add frost upon the snow? We should not say to another, “Brother, I saw you lose your temper yesterday. How could you lose it again today?” Or, “Brother, I did not see you in the church meeting again. You have been absent for a long time. How could you stop coming?” These are not tender exhortations but judgments. Those who exhort do not act like a judge but are full of compassion and the vitality of God’s life. They are like shepherds who shepherd their flock with love, care, and direction.

Exhortation can be for protecting, warning, stabilizing, stirring, and uplifting. All of these outcomes are very sweet. Whenever we are exhorted by others, we should stay in the presence of the Lord for a period of time to take care of our need to confess our sins, pray, or consecrate ourselves. By doing this, our whole person will be encouraged and uplifted. This is the effect of real exhortation.

In every local church, the richer the healthy exhorting is, the more the saints will be comforted, strengthened, revived, and made joyful. Such an effect causes the saints to subjectively experience the Lord’s leading, being members of one another, and being built up into a heavenly church.

Giving with Liberality

Paul then encourages the one who gives to do so with liberality. This giving is related to material and financial matters. Do not look down upon giving, which is a great matter and as

important in this passage as prophesying, serving, teaching, and exhorting. If there is a shortage of giving in the church life, it shows the weak condition of the church.

The Greek word for “liberality” means to be single, pure in motive, and without any other purposes. We must be pure in our giving. Purity in giving makes the giving even sweeter. If we ever receive an offering from the saints, we should be very careful in handling it. We should first consider how to give to others. We should learn to allow money to come to us and then to let it go.

To Paul, money was something living, not dead. He considered money as a seed sown in the earth. He told the Corinthians, “He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Cor. 9:6), and again, “Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness” (v. 10). We must learn to sow our money so that it can bear abundant fruit. If we hold on to money, it will have no chance to grow a harvest of righteousness. If every saint in a local church is faithful in the matter of giving, that church will be greatly blessed.

The Importance of Leadership

Next, Paul encourages those who lead to do so with diligence. We may feel that leading is far more important than giving, yet Paul gives no indication of this. He does not rank leading ahead of giving, or even vice versa. It seems that to Paul, those who give and those who lead are equally crucial.

“To lead” (*proistemi*) literally means “to stand before.” In the church, there should never be someone who rules over others (Matt. 20:25–28). There should only be someone who stands before others (1 Pet. 5:2–3). This should be a brother who has loved the Lord for many years, who is mature in life, and who is rich in truth. Such a brother can stand before the

saints to help them follow the Lord and move according to the commitment the Lord has given them. Therefore, “leading” indicates walking before others as a pattern to be followed.

The constitution of a church’s leaders will determine much about that church life. If the leading ones follow the Lord absolutely, it becomes easy for brothers and sisters to love the Lord. If the leading ones diligently preach the gospel, the whole church will join in preaching the gospel. Leading ones are like head sheep, bellwethers, who walk before the flock so the saints can easily follow.

Leading with Diligence

The church life not only needs leadership, but diligent leading. The meaning of “diligent” in Greek is “haste, eagerness, earnestness, carefulness” (Strong, #4710). It expresses the reaction we would have in quickly bringing a sick person to the hospital.

The Lord Jesus was the most diligent person. When a centurion implored Him for his paralyzed and tormented servant, He said, “I will come and heal him” (Matt. 8:7). Not even for one moment did the Lord delay! He did not tell the centurion, “Please wait while I pray to see what the will of God is.” He did not talk to Peter either, asking, “What do you think—should we go or not?” The Lord’s response seemed to say, “Let’s go! I will heal him immediately!” In His service He used haste. He was zealous. He was in a hurry. He did not wait. He was willing to give Himself to others at every opportunity. In the gospel of Mark, we find that He was so diligent that He did not even have time to eat (Mark 6:31)!

Just as the Lord Jesus was diligent, so was the apostle Paul. When Paul was in Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols (Acts. 17:16). He immediately rose up to preach the gospel in the synagogue there (v. 17). For Paul, diligence did not mean scurrying around

with busywork. When he observed a need, he would quickly rise to meet that need with a burden on his heart. He told the Thessalonians when he wrote to them that he had been taken away from them for a short time in presence, but not in heart. Thus he was all the more eager to see their faces with great desire (1 Thess. 2:17). This is a picture of diligence.

After a period of time, even committed servants of the Lord can fall into a pattern of life in which they no longer know what diligence is. They may rationalize: "I cannot serve right now because I need to eat. I cannot serve right now because it is my time to read the Bible. I cannot serve right now because it is my time to pray." Those who have such logic are no longer servants of the Lord.

What kind of person is a servant of the Lord? A servant of the Lord must be diligent. This means we must always request more of ourselves. Can we go for another mile with a brother (Matt. 5:41)? Can we bear more of a burden? Can we visit more saints? Can we preach the gospel more? Can we spend more time shepherding a brother or sister? Can we take care of more work in the church? Can we dispense more life to others? All of these things are a matter of diligence, and it is this matter that eventually defines every leader and every servant of the Lord.

Showing Mercy with Joy

Finally, Paul talks about one who shows mercy. Those who show mercy not only feel compassion in their heart, but also take the step to actively show it. Such ones can truly walk in the midst of all kinds of people.

Showing mercy is drawing close to others in order to show compassion and to help them. Everyone in the church life needs mercy. Both the older and younger saints need mercy. Both the freshly saved and those saved long ago need mercy. Married couples need mercy, single saints need mercy, those

with children need mercy, and those who are childless need mercy. The church life should be full of mercy for all people.

“Cheerfulness” (*hilarotēs*) is a noun which is the root for the Greek adjective “cheerful” in 2 Corinthians 9:7: “for God loves a cheerful giver.” This word indicates joyfulness. In Romans, Paul encourages showing mercy with such joy, indicating that the joy is already in us. Yet in our experience, we will find that joy is often produced in us when we show mercy to others. Both are true. Therefore, if we have the opportunity to help others, show compassion and mercy, or to bless others, we should do these things with joy within us. Those who have a habit of showing mercy to others will find every opportunity to joyfully do so. Then because they show mercy, a great joy will also be produced within them.

Paul said that we who are many are one body in Christ and have become members one of another. In the church life, everyone should exercise their gifts. Some can prophesy, some can serve, some can teach, some can exhort, some can give, and some can lead. The last item is showing mercy. I hope we can tell the Lord, “Even if I am not able to prophesy, teach, exhort, give, or lead, I still want to show mercy to others. Lord, fill me with compassion and care for the brothers and sisters around me, and fill me with great joy as I show mercy.”

Living in the Church Life

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor.

—Romans 12:9–10

WORD STUDY

The phrase “without hypocrisy” in Romans 12:9 comes from the Greek word *anupokritos*. This word is composed of the prefix *-a*, used as a negative particle, and a derivative of *hupokrinomai*, meaning, “to speak or act under a false part” (Strong, #1527). In the Greek world, *anupokritos* was used when comparing human conduct with the task of an actor and the human life to a stage. In this way, hypocrisy was considered as someone acting or pretending a false role (Kittel, 8:561–563).

The Greek word used in verse 9 for “abhor,” *apostugeō*, is a compound of *apo* and *stugeō*. *Stugeō* appears often in Greek writing, but in the Bible it is only used in this word in this verse. M. R. Vincent compares it to the biblical word for hate, *miseō*, saying, “[*Miseō*] denotes concealed and cherished hatred, and [*stugeō*] denotes hatred expressed.” The preposition *apo* likely adds an intense sentiment to this word, thus bringing it to represent an expressed and intense loathing (Vincent, 3:158).

Two different Greek words are translated “evil” in Romans 12. The first is *ponēros* in verse 9, and the second is *kakos* in verse 21: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Though these words have much in common, there are sharp distinctions that do not allow them to be interchangeable. *Kakos* stands for whatever is base or evil in character and denotes what is useless, incapable, and bad. *Ponēros* indicates what is evil in influence and effect, and denotes what is destructive, injurious, and evil. *Ponēros* is used of Satan as the “evil” in Matthew 5:37, 6:13, and Ephesians 6:16 (Vine, 211–212). *Ponēros* could be thought of as evil that causes evil.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In the opening of Romans 12, Paul introduced the topics of transformation and the church life. Between verses 9 and 21, he spends time talking about a living in the church life that manifests virtues. This living is directed toward the church, God, ourselves, the saints, and God’s sovereignty. Regarding the church, this living must be full of love (12:9–10). Regarding God, this living is related to serving the Lord in a fervent spirit (v. 11). Regarding ourselves, this living is full of hope (v. 12). Regarding the saints, this living involves having the same mind of Christ as we live among the saints (vv. 13–18). Regarding the Lord’s sovereignty, this living involves a full trust that our environment is from the Lord (vv. 19–21).

Loving without Hypocrisy

As Paul begins to talk about the manifestation of virtues in the church life, the first thing he mentions is love: “Let love be without hypocrisy” (Rom. 12:9). “Love” here is from the Greek word *agapē*. It is love with the highest value and is the result of our seeing the surpassing value of the saints.

This kind of love should be without hypocrisy. Hypocrisy means playing what we are not. This means that we should not be like actors on the stage who are playing the roles of other people.

Why would Paul say we should let love be without hypocrisy? It is because in the church life, love often becomes very political. However, his statement shows that there should be no politics in our love. When we tell saints that we love them, we ought to do so because we indeed love them, not because of another motive. Most of the problems in the church life come from hypocrisy in our love. Love for the brothers cannot be made up; it must be lived out in reality. It is very normal for saints who come together to love one another, just as it is very normal for family members to love one another (1 John 3:14–15). We must be careful not to pretend to have love for the saints. Only the reality of this love should be lived out of us. There should be no politics in the church life, and our love should have no hypocrisy.

Two Kinds of Evil

Paul continues, “Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good” (Rom. 12:9). He also says later, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (v. 21). The Greek words for “evil” in these two verses are different, which presents a difficulty for us. If they were the same word, we could simply say that every virtue mentioned between verses 9 and 21 is related to this matter of good and evil. However, the different Greek words mean we cannot explain this passage with the simple and general phrase, “good and evil.”

The Greek language gives us insight into two different kinds of evil. One kind, *kakos*, found in verse 21, focuses on evil character that is unhealthy, improper, immoral, weak, and full of failure. This kind of evil is usually personal and exists because of our personal weaknesses.

The other kind of evil, *ponēros*, found here in verse 9, focuses on evil that affects others. It can be understood as a harmful evil that affects and causes others to become evil and poisonous. *Ponēros* is translated in several places as “the evil one,” who is Satan. This evil is not a general evil but a specific kind of evil that affects others and leads to more evil. This kind of evil may not have the outward form we would expect, but it can bring in evil actions and results, and sows even more evil. It is not only personal but has an effect on those around us. Such evil is fearful, and it is this evil that we must abhor.

Evil That Corrupts the Church Life

The evil (*ponēros*) in Romans 12:9 brings people into unhealthy situations. This kind of evil needs to be abhorred by us. To abhor something means to hate it, avoid it, or even to expel it. We must harshly treat anything that would cause the brothers and sisters around us to forsake their love for the Lord, to stop following Him, or to lose their healthy, pure, and clean walk in His presence. Such evil is not only a personal weakness but even more, something that corrupts our whole church life.

The most horrible thing a servant of the Lord can do is to bring the saints into an unhealthy situation. We may not have an evil heart and we may be very much for the Lord, but one unguarded word can bring the saints into evil. If we recognize this, we will carefully consider our every step and action. We should carefully consider where we live, the house we buy, and even what kind of furniture we purchase lest we bring the saints into any corruption.

We should be watchful that evil does not unconsciously grow and operate in the church life, spoiling many saints. We should be careful before the Lord and with the saints. Neither

our words, our leadership, our service, nor our work should cause the life of the saints to be hurt.

It is sometimes very easy for things not of Christ to spread through the church. For example, there is a restaurant near a particular church's meeting place. For a period of time, some leading brothers would invite other saints to that restaurant after their church meeting to eat and have fellowship. Later on, some sisters found out about this restaurant and went there in groups. Eventually all the saints would go there after the church meetings to drink coffee or eat dessert. This example may not seem immediately evil, but it shows how quickly something that is not of Christ can spread through the church life. If evil and unhealthy things are not dealt with quickly, a whole church can be affected.

Listen to the Bible's words: "Let love be without hypocrisy" and "abhor what is evil." Everything we do or say must be beneficial to the saints. If a certain action or word is not helpful, we should not do it or say it. If we are loose in our words and actions, evil will unconsciously creep into our church life and have an unhealthy and corrupting effect upon the saints. The ruin this evil causes among the saints is terrible.

A church life is far more complicated than we may think. Why is it so hard to find a church that is properly built up? With a deep sigh, we must recognize that this is because there are many operations of evil. For example, there was a particular church in which every saint was lovely, not one was evil. Yet evil had a way to creep in. One brother said a little word one day that caused others to feel it was not important to love the Lord in every situation. Later, a sister said a little word that caused others to lose their absolute consecration to the Lord. Because the leading ones in the church did not pay careful attention to these things and did not abhor the evil, more evil was eventually produced in that church life. This is the case with many churches, and many saints are damaged as a result.

Abhorring What Is Evil

Evil is far beyond our concept of good or bad. It is easy for us to recognize some things as bad, such as gambling, drunkenness, and smoking. On the one hand, smoking is indeed harmful to our bodies. On the other hand, it is not as terrible as the improper things that can happen in the church life that hinder the proper growth of the saints. Should we be more worried about a brother who smokes or a brother who leads the saints away from the Lord? When it comes to the church life, we must pay careful attention and guard against the evil that affects people, produces unhealthy situations, causes others to fall away from the Lord, and causes saints to lose a healthy walk in His presence. Such evil needs to be abhorred.

The evil mentioned here in verse 9 is far beyond the way we normally think of evil. If newly saved saints hear negative gossip when they enter the church life, it is a shame to those who serve the church. Paul clearly said here that we should abhor evil. We should have a jealous heart for the saints, abhorring all evil things, which are not beneficial to them, which frustrate them, and which even corrupt them.

Everything we do in the church life should be unto one purpose—the benefit of the saints. We should hate and expel anything that is harmful to the saints. May the Lord be merciful to us that we could truly abhor whatever brings the saints into unhealthy situations, whatever hinders their serving, whatever restricts their growth, whatever tears down the church, and whatever prevents the saints from glorifying the Lord.

Clinging to What Is Good

In contrast to abhorring what is evil, Paul also says, “Cling to what is good” (Rom. 12:9). For the church life to progress

and be healthy, we first have to have love without hypocrisy, and then we need to both abhor what is evil and cling to what is good.

What is good? Only God Himself is good (Mark 10:17–18). What is truly good is related to God. The Greek word for “good” also carries the meaning of “benefit” (Strong, #18). Any service within the church should have the benefit of the saints as its highest priority. This “good” is not according to our natural concepts. No matter how mature we are spiritually, how rich we are in truth, and how transcendent our revelation is, we cannot force on others whatever we consider “good.” Such enforcing only takes away the opportunities the Holy Spirit has to work on the saints. When we serve the saints, our hope must only be that they could gain Christ.

“To cling” can also be translated “to glue, to cleave, to join” (Strong, #2853). Paul also uses this word in 1 Corinthians: “But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him” (6:17). To cling to something is to cleave to it. This was surely Paul’s own testimony. As he ministered among people, he cleaved to them by becoming as they were. He testified that he became all things to all men, that he may by all means save some (9:19–22). We must have such a practice and reality for the benefit of the saints.

Honoring and Appreciating Others

Paul continues in Romans 12, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor” (v. 10). “Devotion” is the feeling among members of a family. “Honor” means showing appreciation for who a person is. This indicates that in our church life we should properly appreciate the surpassing value of each saint.

To honor the saints means that when we consider them before the Lord, we have the ability to see their value. I have seen many good brothers serve in the church life. Then I

have heard many saints complain that there is no one in the church with talents or abilities. This is not honoring. If we appreciate everyone's value, we will understand that no one is useless or hopeless.

We should "give preference to one another in honor." The Greek word for "giving preference," *proēgeomai*, means to take the lead (Strong, #4285) and by extension means taking an action beyond general standards. In other words, when we truly honor others, we will be willing to pay a higher price to admire and appreciate their value and the portion the Lord has given to them.

These two verses are quite precious. As Paul talks about the church life, he says that our love should be without hypocrisy. He continues by saying that we must never accept evil that could harm the brothers and sisters. Not only so, we must also honor others and see the value of the brothers and sisters before the Lord. This honoring is the secret to our lifelong service. As soon as we meet the saints, we should honor them. For sure, every brother and sister has shortcomings, limitations, and weaknesses, yet we should still appreciate the work of the Holy Spirit on them. If we do not know how to honor others, we can never serve the Lord. A servant of the Lord honors others and gives preference to them.

Living unto the Lord

Not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.

—Romans 12:11

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used in Romans 12:11 for “lagging,” *oknēros*, means “tardy” and can also be translated “grievous, slothful” (Strong, #3636). This word was used in the Septuagint in Proverbs 6:6 and 6:9 of the lazy “ sluggard” who should rise from slumber and learn the industrious ways of the ant. Additionally, this word was used by the Jewish historian Josephus in reference to military attacks that “slowed down because those fighting became soft and lost heart” (Rogers, 339).

The Greek word used here for “diligence,” *spoudē*, means “haste, eagerness, earnestness, or carefulness” (Strong, #4710).

In contrast to the phrase “lagging behind in diligence” is the phrase “fervent in spirit.” The Greek word used here for “fervent,” *zeō*, means “to be hot (boiling or glowing), figuratively to be fervid or earnest” (Strong, #2204).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In Romans 12:9–21, Paul speaks of a living in the church life that manifests virtues. The first virtue was love, which is directed toward the church (v. 9). However, our living is also unto God. Regarding God, our living should include two things—being fervent in spirit and diligently serving the Lord. Together, these two virtues indicate a healthy living unto God.

The Source of Diligence

Where does diligence come from? It comes from our being “fervent in spirit.” The Greek word for “fervent” can also be translated “burning.” This burning in our spirit comes from our vision from the Lord and results in diligence.

If our spirit is fresh, vital, clear, committed, charged, and full of vision, this vision will affect and occupy our person, our living, and our existence. By the vision, freshness, and burning in our spirit, we will become diligent in our living. This burning in spirit will cause us to live another kind of life, a life of diligently serving God.

If asked, most people will say that they want to be diligent. They realize that diligence is healthy and slothfulness is not. However, the strange thing is how many people lack diligence! True diligence comes from a burning within our spirit. Such a burning will fill us with a burden and cause us to seek things that are not yet accomplished. In a certain sense, even God is like this! From the very beginning, He was full of burden for things that were not yet seen.

Let us consider our God. If He had not created the universe, there would be far fewer frustrating things to work with today. If He had not created man, there would be much less trouble to deal with today. Even though He foreknew all the trouble that was to come, God still created man because He

is full of a burden! It is in and through man that He desires to accomplish His eternal will.

A Christian's service mirrors this principle. Those who serve the Lord diligently are inwardly burning, full of burden, and seeking for a way to accomplish something not yet seen. This is the opposite of standing idle or finding busywork to do when nothing else seems to be needed. It is the life of someone who inwardly has vision, commitment, knowledge, and a mission. These things cause us to develop a diligent attitude so that we live a life not only fervent in spirit but also diligent in serving the Lord.

True Diligence

Once we are fervent in spirit, we will be diligent and able to properly serve. Diligence is a thermometer of our spiritual health. If someone asks about our spiritual health, there are many ways we could answer. We could answer, "I wake up and pray at six a.m. every day." Yet this is not diligence. Neither is it diligence if we answer, "I am already on my way to visit other saints by eight a.m." Drinking coffee with a gospel friend is not diligence either. All of these things can become habits without our person being diligent. Some people feel they cannot accomplish anything when they are unable to do yoga or tai chi in the morning. Likewise, some people feel they cannot accomplish anything if they are unable to read the Bible with saints in the morning. One is physical, the other is spiritual, yet both can become habits that determine our daily living if we are not a diligent person. True diligence goes beyond customs and habits.

What is true diligence? It is a matter of our person. Diligence is a way of living that issues from a burning and fervent spirit. The living that results from such a spirit goes beyond our normal living pattern. Consider good leaders of countries. Often, such leaders cannot eat or sleep well. They are unable

to care for their own lives because the need is so great for them to govern the nation well. The principle of serving the Lord is the same. Servants of the Lord must have and live by a time schedule, but this alone does not make them diligent. Their diligence is seen in the fact that they do not care for their own life when the need to serve is so great.

Serving without Limit

Some people may boast, "Hallelujah! This week I have attended three church meetings, visited six people, prayed with three, and delivered fifteen gospel tracts!" Such a boast does not mean that they are diligent yet. Diligent people feel that their service has no limit. Their lives are labor upon labor, work upon work, until their whole being is poured out, like the apostle Paul (2 Tim. 4:6; 2 Cor. 12:15).

A servant of the Lord, especially a leading brother in a church, must be a diligent person. Nothing can destroy saints as quickly or thoroughly as elevating them to a leadership role before their person has become diligent. If we are not careful, someone without diligence can become a leader in the church and will eventually do nothing but spew teachings, doctrines, and rules. Such brothers will condemn the saints, saying, "Why aren't you visiting other saints? Why is our financial offering so short this month? Why are you so bad at properly arranging the chairs for a church meeting?" On the contrary, there are elders who have cleaned their meeting hall's bathrooms for over two decades. Is the existence of an elder in the church for cleaning the bathrooms? Absolutely not! But the diligence demonstrated in their practical labor qualified them for leadership in the church.

True servants of the Lord must be diligent. They must be inwardly burning to the point that they say, "I want more people to be saved and to believe in the Lord. I want more people to love the Lord. I want more people to be revived and

rise up to pursue the Lord. I want more people to stand for the Lord. I want more people to consecrate themselves to the Lord. I want every local church to become strong and luminous, a shining golden lampstand!" With such desire, there is no end to labor.

The Bothersome Effect of a Diligent Person

The Greek word for "diligence" has the meaning of haste or speed. "Lagging" indicates delaying. It shows a lack of ambition and an inability to labor beneficially. Diligence means to be quick, and then to be quicker. Lagging means to wait, and then to wait even longer. A diligent person has urgency, is ambitious, and is active. This is like the apostle Paul, who sometimes upset others with his diligence.

Paul's reputation often arrived before he did. When he came to Thessalonica, the Jews who saw him cried out, "These men who have upset the world have come here also" (Acts. 17:6). When Paul came to a church or a city, he disturbed people, upsetting their religious customs. Similarly, I once heard a brother say to all the saints in a church meeting, "Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that as long as I am here, no one in the church life will sleep well." This word is very good. Good leading brothers and servants of the Lord should be fervent in spirit and should consider their service to the Lord the center of their life, so that wherever they go, people will be bothered by them. God wants to gain such people. He wants to gain those who are diligent, who bother others, not allowing them to live restfully in religion.

There was a small town in the United States where a Christian group was meeting years ago. This group was made up of about twenty or thirty saints who did the same thing every week. At their weekly meeting, they comforted one another, spoke to one another, said "Amen" to what one another prayed, and loved one another. Eventually, they

invited a certain brother to come and have fellowship with them, so he traveled with his wife to their town. This brother shared with them regarding God's will, His kingdom, His work, and His testimony. After the fellowship, the brothers from the small town were very joyful and said good-bye to the visitor. As this brother and his wife traveled home, his wife said one thing: "From now on, they will not have many more peaceful days."

What did she mean? She understood that they had a small meeting that met once a week. Yet into this undisturbed scene came a brother who revealed the spiritual picture of God's will. His wife knew that after seeing such a picture, these saints would lose the comfortable order of their life. Their serving would have to change. This is the effect of a diligent brother coming into the midst of some saints to bother them.

Diligence is not simply the opposite of laziness. Some people are not lazy, but they are caught in their religious customs. Diligence, however, rescues us out of religion! A diligent person will not have time for customs and traditions. May we be diligent, not lagging, and may we live a life of diligently serving the Lord!

Living in regard to Ourselves

Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer.
—Romans 12:12

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used in Romans 12:12 for “hope,” *elpis*, means “anticipation, expectation, confidence” (Strong, #1680). Hope has to do with the unseen and the future, as expressed by Romans 8:24: “For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees?” A Christian’s hope includes several things, such as “the hope of righteousness” (Gal. 5:5), “the hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (Titus 2:13), “the hope of salvation” (1 Thess. 5:8), and “the hope of eternal life” (Titus 1:2, 3:7) (Vine, 311).

The Greek word used here for “tribulation,” *thlipsis*, means “pressure” and can be translated “affliction, anguish, burden, persecution, trouble” (Strong, #2347). The Greek word for “persevering,” *hupomenō*, means “to stay under” and can be translated “abide, endure, patient” (Strong, #5278). Both “rejoicing in hope” and “persevering in tribulation” are written in the dative case, which might lead us to think that they have the same sense. However, according to H. Alford,

these datives are not parallel. Hope is the ground of the joy in “rejoicing,” but tribulation is the state in which patience is found (Alford, 2:444).

The Greek word for “devoted to” means “to hold fast to, to persevere, to give attention to, or to be faithful in” (Rogers, 340). Martin Luther wrote, “This is a loud alarm which all Christians should heed and consider. The words describe the complete dedication demanded by true prayer” (Luther, 176).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In Romans 12:9–21, Paul speaks of a living in the church life that manifests virtues. Regarding the church, our living needs to be full of love. Regarding God, our living must be diligent and in a fervent spirit. Now in verse 12, Paul talks about our living with regard to ourselves. Because we live on the earth, we have tribulations, but we can also have hope. We can rejoice in this hope and endure in the tribulations. Additionally, as Christians, we must pray continuously and be steadfast in prayer.

Rejoicing in Hope

Our life as a Christian is lived in hope, waiting for the Lord’s second coming. Our hope is to be raptured, our desire is to become an overcomer on the earth, and our living is for a better and heavenly country (Heb. 11:16). This is our hope, in which we can rejoice.

“Hope” describes the healthy attitude of a Christian. For Christians to live properly, they need to hope; to be without hope is unhealthy. When we have a healthy living in the presence of the Lord, our living will be full of joy. Even though we may shed tears in tribulation, the sweetness during these

times is beyond measure. Though we may shed tears and be sorrowful, we can still rejoice in our hope.

The Healthy Experience of Tribulation

We should not only rejoice in hope but also be persevering in tribulation. Tribulation occurs when, for the sake of the Lord, we cannot accomplish our natural desires. People who plan everything for themselves and believe they can accomplish everything they have planned have not experienced this tribulation. For example, they may plan to buy a certain kind of house, so they suffer hardship to earn enough money to purchase it. They may eventually get the house, but these sufferings are not the tribulation Paul speaks of. Someone else may have been able to buy a house in a good school district but bought one in another district for the sake of the church. This is tribulation.

Once we begin to love the Lord, we will find out that tribulation is waiting for us everywhere. We will have tribulation in our workplaces and among unbelievers. We will even have tribulation in our church life and as we follow the Lord. When people decide to follow the Lord, they will meet many tribulations that prevent them from following the Lord according to their natural desires.

Tribulation is actually a very healthy thing for those who love the Lord. In fact, many of our most precious experiences with the Lord are in times of tribulation. For this reason, the Lord will sovereignly measure to us many environments to cause us to experience tribulation for Christ and the church.

Persevering in Tribulation

Those who live in hope will also live in tribulation. This is a law God has measured to us. Not only can we rejoice in

hope, but we can also persevere in many tribulations because of such a hope. The Greek word for “persevering” also carries the meaning of endurance or patience. As we follow the Lord, we rejoice in hope and live a life of patience in tribulation.

God does not always deliver us from our tribulations, but He always supplies grace for patience. Patience is a necessary virtue for a Christian to possess. In fact, it is perhaps the most basic virtue needed to follow the Lord. We must be patient in prayer, in gospel preaching, in the building of the church, and in serving the saints.

I knew an excellent engineer who resigned from his job to spend one year studying the Bible with some other saints. The portion the Lord gave him was very good—he was able to speak for the Lord, his spirit was clear, and he was able to judge situations quickly and accurately. After this one year, he spent another year trying to find a job with no success. He said one day, “I feel like I am of no value at all.”

After hearing this, I could only inwardly sigh, “Lord, thank You!” This brother learned something from his experience. The Lord wanted to let him know that he had no value to this world. This brother was learning that without the Lord, his life was indeed valueless. Still, I prayed, “Lord, since this is the trial you have given him, please give more of Yourself to him in this process so that he can be patient in tribulation.”

Being Devoted to Prayer

Tribulation is extremely helpful to us. Hard environments help us learn how to pray, and even how to pray continuously and steadfastly. This is the meaning of “devoted” at the end of the verse—a steadfast continuing. This means to go toward a goal with one’s full strength. The power for us to do this comes completely from God. Those who are devoted to prayer have a goal in their prayer, and a goal in one accord with God causes them to be filled with power from Him.

Prayer is a healthy Christian practice, and steadfast prayer with a goal is needed for God's will to be done. We should tell the Lord, "Thank You for Your will. You are full of operation and working. You want to build up Your church, You want to save many souls, and You want to cause many people to love You and consecrate themselves to You. For this, Lord, please empower us so that we can be devoted to prayer for Your will."

Our prayers are often very different from this. We often focus on our personal needs. Yet the Lord Jesus said, "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:31–33).

When we pray for God's kingdom and righteousness, He will supply us with the things that we need. Therefore, we should pray for higher things, more excellent things, and more heavenly things. Through prayer like this, God, in His operation and working, will supply us with power to accomplish His will.

Living among the Saints (1)

Contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

¹⁴*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*

—Romans 12:13–14

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used in Romans 12:13 for “contributing,” *koinōneō*, means “to share with others” (Strong, #2841). The noun form is used in other verses to indicate communication or fellowship (as in 1 John 1:3 for the “fellowship” among believers and with the Father and His Son). Here in Romans, however, there seems little room for an abstract interpretation of the word. The first part of verse 13 could be translated, “Be sharing in the necessities of the saints” (Vincent, 3:151), referring to financial or material concerns and offerings (Rogers, 340).

In verse 14, Paul describes two aspects of the proper attitude Christians should have toward their persecutors—blessing and not cursing. The Greek word used here for “persecute,” *diōkō*, means “to pursue,” and by implication, “to persecute” (Strong, #1377). This is the same word used in verse 13 for “practicing.” Thus, the end of verse 13 could literally be translated, “pursue/persecute hospitality.” The same word is

also used in Romans 9 to denote Israel's pursuit of the law and the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness.

We are to bless those who persecute us, not curse them. The Greek word used here for "bless," *eulogeō*, means "to speak well of; to invoke a blessing upon" (Strong, #2127). The Greek word used here for "curse," *kataraomai*, means "to doom" (Strong, #2672), or "to imprecate evil upon another" (Thayer, 336). Its base, *katara*, is used in Galatians 3:13 of Christ, who became "a curse" upon the cross on our behalf. Other striking uses of this word are in Hebrews 6:8 of the "cursed" ground and 2 Peter 2:14 of those who will be judged by God for their blatant and gross unrighteousness (Vine, 141).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In Romans 12:9–21, Paul speaks of a living in the church life that manifests virtues. Regarding the church, our living needs to be full of love (vv. 9–10). Regarding God, our living must be diligent and in a fervent spirit (v. 11). Regarding ourselves, our living must be full of hope (v. 12). Now, in verses 13–18, Paul talks about our living with regard to the saints.

Contributing to the Needs of the Saints

The first thing we should consider regarding the saints is contributing to their needs. Romans 12:13 shows that some saints have legitimate needs. If a brother has needs, we should share in his situation and supply him with what he lacks. The Bible's encouragement in this way shows that the riches the Lord gives to us are not only for our own use but also for the saints. Sharing in this way is a very healthy practice.

The word "contributing" can also mean fellowshiping. Paul tells us that we should have fellowship with the saints

in their needs. Generally speaking, there are three types of financial needs in a church. The first is the needs of individual brothers and sisters. For example, some saints may have lost their jobs, some families may have new babies, and other families may be facing many medical bills. All of these are special needs. The second involves the practical and operational needs of the church, such as expenses for utilities. The third is the needs of the work, including the preaching of the gospel in every place and the needs of the servants of the Lord. If a church can take care of the needs of these three—the saints, the church, and the work—it is a healthy church.

We should learn how to handle our finances in a healthy way. Every month, we should set aside some of the money the Lord gives us for these three needs. Our giving is dependent on the Lord's—if He gives more, we ought to give more also; if He gives less, it is acceptable to give less (2 Cor. 8:12–13). As money goes through our hands, some should be reserved for the needs of the saints. Then if possible, we should set aside some money for the church and for the work of the Lord, including in different places.

Those who cultivate such a financial habit may also develop the ability to recognize the different situations and needs among the saints. This ability is not a small thing. When someone has a need, they may not tell others and others may not notice it. To be able to recognize such needs is a precious ability and is developed by always reserving some money for the saints, the church, and the work.

To set aside money in this way is a fellowship with the saints regarding their needs. The focus is not finance but fellowship. For example, when someone receives an offering envelope, they will know in their heart that the brothers and sisters love them. It is not a matter of how much money there is in the envelope but a matter of love. The money is not simply some financial support; it is care for the saints as a healthy practice before the Lord.

Pursuing Hospitality

Romans 12:13 also speaks of practicing hospitality. We should not only have fellowship with the saints regarding their needs but should also show hospitality. The range of our hospitality should include more than just the other saints. The phrase “practicing hospitality” means pursuing hospitality, and proper pursuing always involves paying a price.

It is easy to become bothered when we are asked to provide hospitably. But rather than feeling bothered, we should have the heart to pursue. Paul’s words here seem to be, “When I see potential guests, I will find opportunities to care for them, to help them, and to entertain them. I will even pay a price to do so!”

Persecution from the Religious

Romans 12:14 says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” This is a challenging verse. In the church life, those who persecute us should be blessed by us and not cursed. To “curse” is to wish destruction upon people or to hope that they would perish. This should not be our reaction to our persecutors. Who are our persecutors? They are those who force us to a point that we have no way to go on. This was indeed Paul’s experience.

Who persecuted Paul the most and caused him the most suffering? It was not the Gentiles or the Jews, but James the brother of the Lord Jesus, and those with him in Jerusalem. James was the head of thousands of Christians religiously zealous for the Law (Acts 21:18–20), and it was men from James who brought religious strife into the churches in Galatia (Gal. 2:12–13). My feeling is that James was the one who caused there to be no way for Paul to go on, and that he was the one who persecuted the churches in Asia and asked them to declare their stand, eventually causing all the churches in Asia to forsake Paul (see 2 Tim. 1:15).

One of the cities in the province of Asia was Colossae, the home of Philemon. A reader of the book of Philemon may feel that it is a very sweet letter Paul wrote. Philemon was an elder of the church in Colossae, and the saints in Colossae met in his house (Col. 4:17, Philem. 2). It was not long after Paul wrote the book of Philemon that the churches in Asia forsook him (2 Tim. 1:15). It is possible that by then Philemon was no longer alive, because he probably was an old brother at the time Paul wrote to him. Suppose, however, that he was still alive. As an elder, Philemon's acceptance or rejection of Paul's ministry would mean the acceptance or rejection of Paul's ministry by the whole church in Colossae.

What really happened to the church in Colossae? It is hard for us to say, but we do know Paul's words at the end of his life: "At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them" (2 Tim. 4:16). In other words, even the church in Colossae, shepherded by Philemon, may have forsaken Paul. How could this be? My feeling is that this came from the religious persecution by James.

Religion forces people to choose and declare sides. It forces people to speak lies and empty words. It forces them to follow a "way." They become zealous for God, yet their zeal is apart from Christ and His freedom. The strange thing is that the more people love the Lord, the easier it becomes for them to religiously persecute others. This is because religion easily creeps in, persuading people that their way of thinking is the only right way. Once a person's faith falls from the worship of the living God and is based instead on religious teachings, rules, and practices, their very subjective ideology results in persecution.

Persecution: A Normal Christian Experience

We will find that even in our church life, the Lord will allow some people to persecute us. Those who persecute

other saints are usually overly subjective, insistent, and self-righteous. If we are not pure, the way to follow the Lord seems very smooth. If we follow the Lord purely, many persecutions will visit us. They can come from anywhere. They can come not only from unbelievers but also from the saints, the leading brothers, our companions, and even those around us who love the Lord.

A person who loves the Lord will find that it is normal to be persecuted. The more we consecrate ourselves to the Lord, follow Him, live absolutely for Him, and love and hold fast to Him, the more we will experience persecution. The most normal thing in our Christian life is persecution. Therefore, we should not expect to be successful in everything, to be always understood by others, or to receive compassion from others. It is healthy and normal to be persecuted. If we want to follow the Lord, we should prepare ourselves to suffer many persecutions for the Lord's sake.

Blessing and Not Cursing

Cursing is our natural reaction to persecution. No one likes persecution, because it brings in disaster, distress, and shame. However, the apostle Paul calls upon Christians to have a different reaction—to bless their persecutors and only to bless them!

The Greek word here for “bless,” *eulogeō*, means to speak well of others, which in this verse are those who persecute us. But consider the deeper implications of this. The content of this blessing is based on the sensitive insight of those who are persecuted. This blessing involves refusing to look at the persecutor superficially but rather at their real inward condition. Such insight allows us to avoid being fake or political but to be full of sincerity and reality when we speak and bless. When we bless, it does not mean we compliment people so they will like us and stop their persecution. Instead, it means

we can see their beautiful and good parts, allowing us to rise to genuinely praise them. This is a wonderful effect of the divine life within us.

Only those who live in God's life and have denied their self-life can bless those who persecute them. They are in a high realm, their being is heavenly, and they radiate blessing to others. Those who are in religion vainly repeat to themselves, "We will treat evil with good." However, those who are spiritual will simply radiate their heavenly being to those who do evil to them. This radiance produces a heavenly effect—blessing. What a blessing this is!

Living among the Saints (2)

*Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.
Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty
in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your
own estimation.*

—Romans 12:15–16

WORD STUDY

Two actions are described in Romans 12:15—rejoicing and weeping. The Greek word used here for “rejoice,” *chairō*, means “to be cheerful, that is, calmly happy” (Strong, #5463). The Greek word used here for “weep,” *klaio*, means “to sob, that is, wail aloud” (Strong, #2799).

In verse 16, the Greek word used for “associate” is *sunapagō*, which means “to carry (lead) away with, to condescend” (Strong, #4879). In the sense of “leaving or being carried off along with,” the word indicates a yielding or submission. The original sense of the phrase in this verse means to be drawn into sympathy with lowly things or people (Vincent, 3:160–161). The Greek word for “lowly,” *tapeinos*, means “depressed, that is humiliated in a circumstance or disposition” (Strong, #5011). It is used metaphorically in the New Testament to denote a person

brought into a humble condition or reduced to a poorer circumstance (Thayer, 614).

Finally, Paul also says, “Do not be wise in your own estimation.” The Greek word used here for “wise,” *phronimos*, means “thoughtful (implying a cautious character)” as opposed to “practical skill” or “intelligence,” and in a bad sense can mean “conceited” (Strong, #5429). The key to this phrase is “in your own estimation,” denoting a view in your own sight or judgment (Vincent, 3:161). Martin Luther called this phrase an address to those who are conceited, stubborn, and obstinate. Those who are “wise in their own estimation” are essentially the opposite of those who, at the beginning of the verse, are “of the same mind toward one another” (Luther, 177).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Entering Others’ Feelings

The Greek word for “rejoice” in Romans 12:15 (*chairō*) can be translated “be cheerful” or “be calmly happy.” This is different from the joy (*agalliaō*) the Lord Jesus had in the Holy Spirit (Luke 10:21), which implies a leaping about (Strong, #21). In other words, this rejoicing in Romans does not mean to leap or jump for joy. Rather, it is an inward joy and cheerfulness. Yet the weeping here in Romans (*klaiō*) is an outward sobbing, like the way the Lord Jesus shed tears over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). This weeping is different from the weeping (*dakruō*) of the Lord Jesus at Lazarus’s tomb (John 11:35), where He silently shed tears.

What does it mean to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep? It means to enter into the feeling of others. When other people rejoice, we can enter into their feeling. When other people are sorrowful and weep, we can also enter into their feeling.

Being of the Same Mind

Paul's phrase in Romans 12:16, "be of the same mind toward one another," does not mean we must all have the same opinions. It means that we must take the mind of Christ as our mind (Phil. 2:5) and, together with others, consider God's will and its accomplishment. In other words, the Lord's thoughts become our thoughts. What the Lord desires to gain becomes our desire. In this way, we will be of the same mind toward one another.

Associating with the Lowly

Paul continues, "Do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly" (Rom. 12:16). The Greek word for "associate with," *sunapagō*, means to walk with or to depart with others. The prefix *sun* means union or togetherness (Thayer, 599). In other words, Paul's encouragement for us is to be together with other people. This shows that in the church life, we should have love and union in life with the saints. Only in love and the union of the divine life is a true association produced.

The "lowly" are those who are pressed down by their environment. "Lowly" does not indicate a status or nature, but humbleness brought about by the environment. To associate with the lowly does not mean that we should take off our nice coat the moment we see a homeless man. Rather, it means we should understand him, enter his feeling, and show compassion to him as he experiences such a hard situation and frustration. Associating with the lowly is a characteristic of a person with a healthy, mature spirit. Such a person can quickly relate to the saints and can help revive and encourage them in the midst of their pressing environments.

Not Being Wise in Our Own Estimation

Paul further says, “Do not be wise in your own estimation” (Rom. 12:16). The same Greek word for “wise” is used in Matthew 7:24, in which the wise man builds his house upon the rock. In this verse in Matthew, wisdom is related to building. The same word shares its root with the “wisdom” of God in Ephesians 1:8. True wisdom is related to God and His eternal will. Though we may go to lowly people and have compassion on them, if we are not able to perfect them or lead them to the presence of God, our compassion is without wisdom.

There is a balance between our association with the lowly and our acting with wisdom. On the one hand, to act with wisdom and to give the best help may mean not immediately giving money to a brother or sister who is in need. On the other hand, acting with wisdom does not mean doing nothing and causing others to feel that everything is fine if we only have the Lord (James 2:15–16; 1 John 3:17). True wisdom is needed in order to help someone in a proper way and to encourage them to seek the Lord in their situation. This may sometimes cause us to refrain from giving money to a brother in financial difficulty and instead tell him, “Many brothers and sisters are concerned for you and are praying for you. We will remember your needs before the Lord.”

As we learn to associate with others we must be wise, yet not in our own estimation. We should not associate with others to the point that they rely on us and look to us instead of looking to the Lord. Yet we should not consider ourselves wise to a point that we do not practically care for the needs of others but instead assure them that the Lord will care for them. This association is not easy to handle in a balanced way. We should care for the needs of people, yet we must also help them live before the Lord. We should help them to have not only the Lord but also the church, where their needs can be

taken care of. May the Lord have mercy on us that we would learn how to associate with others without becoming wise in our own estimation.

Living among the Saints (3)

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

—Romans 12:17–18

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used for “evil” at the beginning of Romans 12:17 is *kakos*, which stands for whatever is base or evil in character, and denotes what is useless, incapable, and bad. This is in contrast to *ponēros* (v. 9), which is evil that begets or causes more evil. *Kakos* can indicate things that are injurious or destructive, or what is morally or ethically evil, whether a person, quality, emotion, or deed (Vine, 211).

Verse 18 begins with “if possible.” The Greek word used here for “possible,” *dunatos*, means “powerful or capable” (Strong, #1415) and indicates “the ability to do” (Vine, 477). The phrase “if possible” would seem to mean “if you are able to” or “if you can.” However, the following phrase, “so far as it depends on you,” may change the sense of “if you can” to “if others allow it.” In other words, it is not a matter of our ability to change people or things. Our part, according to H. Alford, is not to change the environment but only to be at peace (Alford, 2:445).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Romans 12:17–18 tell us how important it is to make peace and live in peace with others in the church life. The first principle of making peace with people is that we should not pay back evil for evil. This means that even if someone treats us in an improper way or does something unprofitable toward us, we must not pay them back with evil.

Second, we should have regard for good things in the sight of men. We should always be ready to do things that have a high quality in other people's eyes. Thus, verse 17 has a negative command, "never pay back evil for evil," and a positive command, "respect what is right."

At Peace with All Men

We should be at peace with all men (Rom. 12:18). This is especially crucial in the church life, since peace among the saints is not a given fact. It is relative, not absolute. Our peace with the Lord is unconditional (5:1), but our peace with the saints is conditional.

We should notice that the phrase "if possible" comes before Paul mentions being at peace. When he talked about loving without hypocrisy (12:9), there was no "if possible." When he talked about abhorring what is evil and clinging to what is good (v. 9), there was no "if possible." When he talked about giving preference to one another in honor (v. 10), there was no "if possible." Even when he talked about blessing those who persecute us (v. 14), Paul did not say "if possible." Yet here, when he mentions being at peace, he says "if possible." We may think that it is not difficult to gain peace in the church life. Yet Paul's words indicate how hard it is to have peace in the church life.

Brotherly love is one of the most crucial things in the church life, yet it is also one of the hardest things to maintain

and practice. Peace is the same; it is almost impossible to maintain peace between people. Therefore Paul says, “If possible, so far as it depends on you.” He seems to be saying, “Brothers, I am giving you the impossible task of living in peace with all people. Do not give this practice up when you realize it is an impossible mission. However, you must understand that when you try to practice living in peace, it will seem to be impossible.”

The same is true for us today. The phrase “so far as it depends on you” shows that we must pay a price to make this peace a possibility with all people. One of the most needed things among churches and saints is a mutual peace. Peace is important and hard to gain. For this reason, we must each pay a big price for it.

However, the phrase “if possible” shows that we may not be able to produce the peace we desire, even if the price has been paid. How should we handle such an outcome? First, we need to continue to honor peace, recognizing its value in the church life. Then we must understand that we may not presently be able to gain such peace. If this is the case, we should not beat the other saints until peace comes. Rather, we should learn to faithfully practice what these verses say—not repaying evil for evil, and associating with the lowly (v. 16).

Never Sacrificing God’s Benefit

As we struggle to keep a peaceful relationship with the saints, we should always have in mind the benefit of God. True peace is not gained simply by one side or another sacrificing their opinion. Though the proper principle of seeking peace does involve a willingness to deny ourselves, it must always be with God’s benefit in view. The highest priority in the church life is Christ, not peace, and there are times when standing for Christ means the loss of peace. In such situations, a false peace could be easily gained if we drop Christ as

our first priority. If we begin to pursue peace as our highest priority, we will many times sacrifice God's benefit to gain it.

Paul himself was a good example of the principle of standing for God's benefit even at the expense of peace. He never forsook the revelation God gave him regarding Christ and the church, not even for the sake of peace. On the one hand, he did his absolute best to maintain a proper fellowship with the church in Jerusalem. On the other hand, he honored the ministry God had committed to him by preaching the gospel among the Gentiles, supplying Christ to them, perfecting the saints, and building up the churches of the Gentiles.

Although there was friction between Paul and the church in Jerusalem (see chapter 177), he tried his best to maintain peace for good fellowship between the churches of the Gentiles and the churches in Judea. However, he never said, "Dear brother James, because some people are bothered with me, from now on I will do nothing but what you tell me to do." From beginning to end, Paul never sacrificed God's benefit. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul himself said of false believers from Jerusalem, "We did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you" (Gal. 2:5).

Paul never sacrificed the truth or compromised with religious authority and ideology, even for the sake of maintaining a so-called peace. He never compromised what the Lord committed to him. He was so firm for what he stood for that he was put into prison many times and suffered much persecution (2 Cor. 11:23).

At the same time, Paul was not divisive. No matter what happened to him, his words were still, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." May the grace and mercy of the Lord allow us to pursue peace with all people while never compromising God's benefit or vision concerning Christ and the church.

Living under God's Sovereignty

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰"But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

—Romans 12:19–21

WORD STUDY

In Romans 12:20, it is hard to explain the meaning of the phrase "you will heap burning coals on his head." Scholars and commentators try to describe it in many ways, including the possibility that it is a figure of speech designed to be taken metaphorically (Alford, 2:446). Another possibility is expressed by J. Thayer, "Among the Arabs and Hebrews the figure of 'coals on fire' is common as a symbol of divine punishment. The Arabians call things which cause very acute mental pain, 'burning coals of the heart and fire in the liver'" (Vincent, 3:163). This pain and fire could be described as the glow and burn of shame that would accompany even the worst person upon receiving benefit from an enemy. Martin Luther calls this feeling the

grieving of the Spirit brought upon a person by the display of good deeds (Luther, 178).

The Greek word used for “evil” at the beginning of verse 21 is *kakos*, which stands for whatever is base or evil in character, and denotes what is useless, incapable, and bad. *Kakos* can indicate things that are injurious or destructive, or what is morally or ethically evil, whether a person, quality, emotion, or deed (Vine, 211).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In the opening of Romans 12, Paul introduced the topics of transformation and the church life. In verses 9–21, he spends time talking about a living in the church life that manifests virtues. This living is directed toward the church, God, ourselves, the saints, and God’s sovereignty. Regarding the church, this living must be full of love (12:9–10). Regarding God, this living is related to serving the Lord in a fervent spirit (v. 11). Regarding ourselves, this living is full of hope (v. 12). Regarding the saints, this living involves having the same mind of Christ as we live among the saints (vv. 13–18).

Here at the end of the chapter (vv. 19–21), Paul addresses our living regarding God’s sovereignty when he says, “Never take your own revenge, beloved.” Things may not always be fair in the church life. However, we should not seek a fair reward because we believe that the Lord will properly repay and vengeance is His. This is totally related to our recognition that all environments we find ourselves in are from the Lord.

Loving Our Enemy

Verse 20 is a difficult verse. It speaks of heaping burning coals upon our enemy’s head. However, this is not an action taken by us for the sake of revenge. There are three reasons

we can say this. First, in verse 19, Paul tells us that vengeance is the Lord's, and these coals cannot contradict that. Second, everything we are told to do for our enemy in verse 20 is positive. Finally, the next immediate phrase in verse 21 is to "overcome evil with good." Therefore, this heaping of burning coals must be a positive thing.

If this phrase is positive, what could it mean? There was a saying in the Middle East in Paul's time: "Coals are on the heart, and fire is on the liver." According to the culture at that time, a person's heart was related to compassion. These coals are not for an enemy to be burnt and killed. The coals we put on our enemy's head are the compassion in our heart for him. By feeding our enemy when he is hungry and giving him a drink when he is thirsty, we are truly showing our love for him.

Overcoming Evil with Good

Finally, verse 21 says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Here, "evil" is from the Greek word *kakos*, indicating something useless, evil, and corrupt in nature. It could mean evil deeds. "Good" (*agathos*) was used in Mark 10:18 to describe Christ and God as the unique good One. Therefore, the phrase "overcoming evil with good" means living out Christ. By living out the good person of Christ, we overcome useless, evil, and corrupt things. Ultimately, this kind of living is what produces all the virtues needed for a healthy church life.

Subjection to Authority

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. ²Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. ³For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; ⁴for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. ⁵Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. ⁷Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

—Romans 13:1–7

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used in Romans 13:1 for “person,” *psuchē*, means “soul,” denoting the breath in man and thus the natural life of a man (Vine, 588). *Psuchē* has various meanings in the New Testament, but in regard to man, it is distinguished from

man's body (*sōma*) and spirit (*pneuma*) in First Thessalonians 5:23. The "soul" of man is used in the Bible as the seat of personality, that by which a man perceives, feels, and desires, and even the seat of will and purpose (Vine, 588). It is a broad word and can also be used to simply refer to the whole person of man (Vincent, 3:121–122).

The phrase "to be in subjection" is translated from the Greek word *hupotassō*, which means "to subordinate, to obey" (Strong, #5293). It is composed of two Greek words—*hupo*, meaning "under, placed beneath" (Strong, #5259), and *tassō*, meaning "to arrange in an orderly manner" (Strong, #5021). Thus, "to be in subjection" indicates remaining under the established order. God has appointed authorities, and to resist them is to resist His ordinance.

Paul makes an absolute statement in verse 1: "For there is no authority except from God." This includes authority in the heavens and on earth, spiritual or governmental (Alford, 2:446).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In Romans 12, Paul introduced the topic of transformation and talked about the manifestation of virtues needed for our life in the church. Now in chapter 13, Paul tells us how to live in order to present a proper testimony of the church. Verses 1–7 talk about our subjection to authorities, and verses 8–10 talk about the practice of loving one another. It may be surprising to see that subjection to authorities is so important, but it is related to the order God has established. The practice of loving one another is related to the substance and content of the church life. In other words, our testimony regarding God's established order is related to our relationship with the authorities, while our testimony regarding the substance and content of the church life is related to loving one another.

Romans 13:1 has a most striking phrase: “For there is no authority except from God.” This is an uplifted view of authority and applies both to the church life and to the world. If we go to another country, we must obey the authorities of that country and follow their traffic signs while driving. If we say, “I’ve never seen such traffic signs in my country, so I do not need to follow them,” then we would not be obeying authority. We need to realize that no matter where we are, we must accept the authorities in that place, for there is no authority except from God.

Our Soul and God’s Established Order

Romans 13:1 says that every person, or soul, should be subject to the governing authorities. In the Bible, “soul” often indicates our whole person. For example, at the end of Genesis, the Bible records seventy “souls,” meaning seventy people, of the house of Jacob came to Egypt (Gen. 46:27).

Why did Paul use the word for “soul” in this verse? It is because it is first our soul that must be in subjection to God’s established order. Our soul has three parts—the mind, emotion, and will. All three can be seen in Romans 7. The function of our will is in verse 19: “For the good that I want.” The function of our mind is seen in our finding of a law in verse 21, and the function of emotion is seen in the delight in the law of God in verse 22. It is crucial to have a healthy and proper soul in order to be preserved in the healthy order God has established.

Spiritual Authority

Spiritual authority is not defined by an official position in the church. When the Lord Jesus was teaching the crowds, He had an authority among the people that the scribes did

not have (Matt. 7:29). The scribes of the Jews surely taught people, but they did not have much authority. The words they spoke may have been correct, but their person was not.

Spiritual authority flows from one's character and person. For this reason, no leading one in the church should struggle to have their authority recognized. Those who so strongly desire to have authority are usually not qualified to lead. Authority is manifested in a normal living. A person with true authority does not need to demand or ask others to obey, because others will be willing to obey on their own accord. If we have spiritual authority, it is the normal outflow of our person.

The Lord Jesus was a man with authority when He was on the earth. By His authority He cast out demons, forgave sins, and healed many sicknesses (Luke 4:36, 5:24, 9:1). His earthly authority was a divine ruling produced by His person. Therefore, authority has two aspects. On the one hand, authority is related to our spiritual being; on the other hand, authority is the result of the normal living of our spiritual being. This normal living is what brings the Lord's rule to people.

The healthier our relationship with the Lord is, the more spiritual we will be and the more the Lord's ruling will be produced in our person. The more we live under the Lord's authority, the more spiritual weight we will have and the deeper our learning before the Lord will become. Knowing authority can be the hardest lesson for us to learn in the church life, but it is one of the most valuable. The church life needs spiritual authority, and brothers and sisters must learn to hold fast to the proper order God has established in His life.

Living in God's Established Order

In Greek, subjection (or obedience) is related to arrangement, establishment, and assignment. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, he created an army by properly

organizing them by tribes and families (Num. 1:1–3). A healthy church life also has a proper order. To live in a healthy way within the church life, we must recognize the order in life. In other words, we must recognize the proper authority in the church.

To recognize the order in life is important for both older and younger saints. The leading ones should learn not to struggle to be authorities, and the younger brothers and sisters should learn to obey authorities. The problem in many churches is that the older saints insist on their authority and the younger saints insist on disobeying authority. In a healthy situation, this is not so. In a healthy situation, the older we become, the more we should not want to be an authority, and the younger we are, the more we should be willing to obey the authorities. The lesson of authority is not easy to learn for either the older or younger ones.

Someone may ask, “Who is my authority? Whom should I obey?” People like to obey someone who is honorable, thinking that such obedience is more valuable. People also like to obey someone who is physically located far away, because that person’s authority will not touch them so strongly. Our biggest test in the church life is obeying the authority God has established in the local church where we are.

True obedience is not an easy lesson to learn. The longer we live in the church life, the harder it usually is for us to obey. A two-year-old boy easily admires his four-year-old brother. However, when he turns six, he may begin to fight with his now eight-year-old brother. When he is eighteen, he may not even honor his twenty-year-old brother. The longer we are saved, the easier it becomes for this to become our experience. But the church is built by God with the order established by Him. We should learn to live in this proper order and arrangement, obeying the authorities God has measured to us.

The different reactions to authority established by God can be seen in the angelic realm. God has arranged everything in

the universe, even the angels. When Michael the archangel was contending with the devil and disputed about the body of Moses, he dared not bring a reviling accusation against Satan. Instead, he said, “The Lord rebuke you!” (Jude 9). After Moses passed away, Satan may have desired to raise his corpse up to produce a new religion. Therefore, it was critical for Michael to keep the corpse of Moses until the New Testament age, in order that Moses could become a witness of the glory of the Lord Jesus (Matt. 17:2–3).

Satan did not obey God’s authority, but Michael kept God’s established order. He could not rebuke Satan himself, but said, “The Lord rebuke you!” Although Satan had already lost the status he had enjoyed before God prior to his fall, Michael still honored God’s order. Of course, Michael did not follow Satan in rebellion! At the same time, Michael did not willfully ignore the order established by God, even after Satan’s rebellion.

A Warning concerning Authority

The Bible clearly tells us that there are governing authorities over us. This is true in society, and it is true in the church life. Our interaction with authority is the greatest touchstone in our lifelong spiritual growth. A touchstone is a test that determines the quality or genuineness of something. This is what our relationship with authority is for us. Whether our spiritual life can grow in a healthy way or not is absolutely related to our attitude toward authority.

There is an order in the universe, an order in the church life, and an order among the brothers and sisters. Authority is a very holy thing in the universe. Therefore, Romans 13:1 must be read with a sober attitude. We must recognize the order God has established in the universe, and we should always submit ourselves under His established authority, whether we like it or not.

Romans 13:2 says that whoever resists authority opposes the ordinance of God and brings condemnation upon themselves. Paul did not say, “has opposed God,” but “has opposed the ordinance of God.” What is the difference? Opposing God means sin. It means we fall short of His glory and offend His righteousness; we are unable to match His holiness, and so lose a healthy life relationship with Him. Offending the ordinance of God means we have problems with God’s work. God’s established order is for His work, and God’s work is maintained through His established order. If we offend God’s established order, we may still maintain a good relationship with God, but we will be driven out of His work and operation. It is impossible for us to be part of His work if we cannot respect His established order! Actually, once we offend the ordinance of God, it is hard for Him to even continue His work in us.

We should be cautious. Whoever resists authority opposes the ordinance of God, and such people will bring condemnation on themselves. This is true in the world as well as in the church life. The hardest thing for people to accept is authority, especially in the United States. Everyone wants freedom, everyone wants to live according to their will, and very few people are willing to obey anyone else. We must realize that each one of us will eventually face a great challenge: authority. If we learn to properly take care of this matter, we can be spiritually preserved lifelong.

The Church’s Practical Testimony

Romans 13:3 tells us that authority gives praise to those who have good behavior and fear to those who have evil behavior. A person who keeps the law is not afraid to call the police, and the police will never bother such a person. Verse 4 even calls authority God’s minister to us for good! We should recognize that those who are set over us are ministers of God for our good.

Verse 5 says we must be in subjection, not only because of wrath but also for the sake of our conscience. Actually, our conscience can regulate us and help us obey the governing authorities. The following verses are so practical. We ought to pay our taxes and customs to whomever they are due.

After talking of so many divine and heavenly things regarding the church in Romans 12, Paul's mentioning of paying taxes initially seems out of place. However, the testimony of the church begins with a proper respect of God's order. Paying taxes is a beautiful testimony of a Christian who lives in this order. God is the head of all things, and the order He establishes ought to be very important to us lifelong. If we cannot obey and submit to the order established by God, we cannot truly obey God Himself.

True obedience is related to God's order and our conscience. This obedience is the testimony manifested through the saints in the church life.

Love: The Fulfillment of the Law

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. ⁹For this, “You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

—Romans 13:8–10

WORD STUDY

In Romans 13:8, the Greek word for “fulfill” is *plēroō*, which can also be translated “accomplish, complete, fill up, perfect, supply” (Strong, #4137). In verse 10, the noun *plērōma* is used for “fulfillment,” meaning “completion,” indicating either that which fills or that which is being filled up (Strong, #4138). In the context of these verses, love is the piece that fills up and completes the law. The Greek word *plērōma* (v. 10) has the suffix *ma*, which is used to denote the result of an action (Robinson, 139). Therefore, the word could be translated “a complete fulfillment” (Rogers, 341).

Martin Luther wrote of this passage: “This command therefore is immeasurably deep, and every Christian should

thoroughly explore himself with respect to it, as he conscientiously examines himself” (Luther, 185).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The proper testimony of the church life firstly involves obeying authorities (Rom. 13:1–7). The content and substance of the church life is then testified through our loving of one another with the feeling of owing others (v. 8).

Our Debt to Others

Romans 13:8 says, “Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another.” In the matter of love, we should always feel that we owe others. This debt is not financial, though it may often involve our finances and time. If we love someone, we will always ask ourselves, “Can I care for him more?” or, “Can I spend more time with her?” If we genuinely love the saints, many of them will continually be on our heart, and we may even shed tears when we think of them (see Acts 20:31; 2 Cor. 2:4). This is the result of a feeling of owing others. True love is full of this feeling. Those who love others do not count how much they have done for others but instead feel that there is always a way to love even more.

It is good to feel we owe others. This is not obligation but love.

The Fulfillment of the Law

Romans 13:8 continues, “He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.” Why is this? Verse 9 lists many commandments, but at the end sums them all up with, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In other words, if

we love our neighbors as ourselves, will we steal from them? If we love people as ourselves, will we murder them, covet their possessions, or act improperly toward them? We will not, nor can we.

Paul said that all the commandments of the law are summed up in the saying, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Surely, when we love our neighbor, all of these commandments will be fulfilled, and so verse 10 says, "Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." "Fulfillment" here can also be translated "completion." True love is a manifestation of the divine life. Believers may not understand the law, yet when the reality of love is manifested by them, that is the completion of the law within them.

The Armor of Light

Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. ¹²The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

—Romans 13:11–14

WORD STUDY

Paul’s encouragement in Romans 13:11 is for us to “awaken from sleep.” The Greek word used here for “awaken,” *egeirō*, means “to waken or to rouse from sleep, from sitting or lying, from disease, from death, or figuratively from inactivity and nonexistence” (Strong, #1453). It is likely that Paul meant a spiritual sleep, as in similar passages in 1 Corinthians 15:34 and Ephesians 5:14 (Luther, 187). It is against such sleep that Christ admonishes believers in Mark 13:35–37, accompanied by the command to keep diligent watch for His second coming. Indeed, our awakening here in Romans 13:11 is closely linked

to the knowledge that our day of salvation, when Christ comes again, is rapidly approaching (Vincent, 3:165).

Additionally, Paul encourages us to “put on the armor of light.” “Armor,” *hoplon*, means “an implement, utensil, or tool” (Strong, #3696). Though this word could be used of any tool or implement, it was especially used of the arms employed in warfare (Thayer, 449). The thought is that we ought to cast off works of darkness, as one casts off a garment (Vincent, 3:166), and clothe ourselves with the armor of light (Rogers, 341).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Romans 12:1–15:13 can be divided into four sections that focus on the topic of transformation. The first section (12:1–3) introduces transformation. The second section (12:4–21) describes a living in the church life that manifests virtues. The third section (13:1–10) tells us how to live in order to present a proper testimony of the church life. The final section begins with Romans 13:11 and deals with the kingdom life. To live out the reality of the kingdom life, firstly, we must put on the armor of light (13:11–14), and secondly, we must properly receive the saints (14:1–15:13), which will be covered in the following three chapters.

The Approaching Day of Salvation

Romans 13:11 says that it is already the hour for us to awaken from sleep. The tone of this verse indicates that our life is a life of fighting. We should awaken from sleep, knowing that our salvation, the redemption of our body, is nearer than when we first believed.

I remember two brothers in a church arguing with each other years ago. Later, the older brother said to me with

sighing, “What is worthy of our arguing? Look at the apostle Paul—he only ministered for several years, yet he preached the gospel in so many places and raised up so many churches. Consider us; what have we done in the past few years? What is there for us to fight over?”

Paul was able to work so hard for the Lord because he was inwardly watching for Him. Paul realized that the day of the redemption of his body was always nearer than when he first believed. We need to have the same realization today. Many honorable servants of the Lord love Him, serve Him, and work for Him, yet they have unconsciously fallen asleep to His coming. We must awaken and know that after every day, the day of our salvation is nearer than ever.

Putting On the Armor of Light

Verse 12 says, “The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Paul’s feeling was that every moment brought him nearer to the day of the Lord’s second coming. Though it is deep night now, the light is coming soon. The Lord is coming soon! Therefore, Paul encourages us to cast off works of darkness and to put on the armor of light.

Armor is an instrument, a kind of vessel. Works of darkness are deeds that cannot stand being exposed to the light. To put on the armor of light is to become a vessel of light. This does not mean that we ourselves take up a weapon called “light,” but that we become a vessel testifying of and manifesting God’s light. This testimony and manifestation of light means behavior and work that is good, righteous, and true (Eph. 5:9). This is in contrast to works of darkness, which cannot stand the light.

The putting on of the Lord Jesus Christ in verse 14 is the putting on of the armor of light in verse 12. They are different aspects of the same thing. When we put on the Lord

Jesus Christ, we put on Christ's person and accomplishments. Once His person, His accomplishments, and His surpassing riches are realized in us, He becomes the armor of light that wages war against the lusts of our flesh.

On the one hand, we must live properly, as if we are in the day time. On the other hand, we must keep watch as if it is night. Dear brothers and sisters, be encouraged to put on Christ, the armor of light, to become a vessel of light, and to live out Christ, magnifying Him and fighting for the gospel!

Receiving the Saints (1)

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. ²One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. ³The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. ⁴Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ⁵One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. ⁷For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. ¹⁰But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹²So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

¹³Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way. ¹⁴I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. ¹⁵For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

—Romans 14:1–15

WORD STUDY

In Romans 14, Paul continues to describe the worthy conduct among saints in the church. Especially in verses 1–12, Paul’s exhortation is to mutually forbear, emphasized by his word that all must serve the Lord according to their own sincere persuasion (Alford, 2:451).

In the phrase “accept the one who is weak in faith” (v. 1), the Greek word for “accept,” *proslambanō*, denotes a taking to oneself and signifies a special interest on the part of the receiver, suggesting a welcome attitude (Vine, 511).

The Greek word for “weak” in verse 1, *astheneō*, means “to be feeble in any sense” (Strong, #770). It is always used to indicate a lack of strength or power, especially human strength. Additionally, it can be used to denote one who is sick or diseased (Thayer, 80). In the phrase “weak in faith,” it could indicate a person whose faith is completely powerless and feeble, or one whose faith falters at a given moment or in a special case (Rogers, 341).

There are two sides in this passage. The strong brother despises, or holds contempt for, the weak brother, while the weaker judges the stronger (v. 3). Both extremes can be labeled as the effect of spiritual pride, and Paul admonishes both (vv. 3, 10) (Vincent, 3:167).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Receiving the Weak in Faith

Romans 14:1 begins, “Now accept the one who is weak in faith.” This introduces the topic that will be addressed through Romans 15:13—the necessity of properly receiving the saints. Every brother and sister should be properly received, including those who are weak in faith. Such receiving should not be for the purpose of passing judgment on their specific opinions.

A key to this section is the end of verse 3: “for God has accepted him.” This indicates that we should receive others based on the fact that God has received them. If God has received them, even those who are weak in faith, why should we judge them on any specific matter, such as eating (vv. 2–3)?

What does the phrase “weak in faith” mean? Weakness indicates a shortage of the vitality of life. If people have vitality, they can easily overcome any hard or frustrating environment. Because those who are weak in faith cannot live before the Lord in vitality, they live according to methods and habits. Some may feel unable to come close to the Lord in prayer if they eat meat, so they eat only vegetables. However, others may see such a feeling as a symptom of weakness. Though we may differ, we still need to receive one another.

Living before the Lord with Vitality

Although Paul uses the illustration of eating, weakness can manifest itself in every aspect of the Christian life. As we follow the Lord, if we are unable to stand with Him in one thing, we will become weak in faith concerning that very thing. Yet weakness is not the normal state of faith. The characteristic of faith, and the characteristic of a person filled with faith, is vitality and freedom. Paul said, “I

know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself” (v. 14). In other words, Paul felt free to eat meat (though in love, he would not exercise such freedom if it would harm a brother). He had a healthy relationship with Christ and was full of vitality, freedom, and strength to stand and live before the Lord.

It is not healthy to be weak. Weakness in faith is the result of being short of Christ and is revealed in the fact that we begin to rely on things other than Christ. Yet God wants us to belong to and be related to Christ alone. This is totally a matter of life and vitality. Those who are not organically related to Christ will quickly seek other things to rely on.

Watchman Nee often wore a suit when he ministered. When he was married, the brothers with him tried to persuade him to have a new suit made. These brothers may have felt a new suit was the proper way to show respect to the bride. Watchman Nee, however, answered, “I can wear this suit when I give messages, so why can’t I wear it in the wedding?” To him, nothing was more glorious than serving the Lord and speaking for the Lord. Because of his vital life before the Lord, he did not feel constrained by the culture or traditions around him. This showed that the faith in him was strong and not weak.

Having a Proper Receiving

Why do people rely on other things instead of Christ? It is often because their relationship with the Lord is not healthy. Many Christians belong to an organization or sect because in it there are other things to rely on besides Christ. It is hard to live before the Lord but easy to live according to an organization that tells us what to do. Belonging to such an organization quickly replaces the vitality Christians should have before the Lord, weakening their faith. What should our reaction be to a brother or sister in this situation?

Because God has received them, we should receive them also, though we should not receive the organization they belong to.

Verse 5 shows us how this principle of accepting believers extends beyond eating—we should receive a brother who regards one day above another. Yet notice that Paul does not say we should accept his teaching or bring other saints into it. Rather, Paul says, “Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.” The promotion of some days as holy and other days as common is not a teaching we should receive and promote. Receiving people and receiving their teachings are two different things.

Paul’s soul was so broad! We should receive weak people but not a weak teaching. Though we may receive a brother who keeps the Sabbath, we cannot encourage the other saints to do the same. Receiving saints is one thing, leading the saints is another. This brother may feel we must honor his practice, because he is convinced in his own mind. Though we should receive him because he has the Lord, this does not mean we must receive his teaching and allow it to lead the church.

Living in Love with a Firm Stand

In verses 7–9, Paul repeatedly refers to living and dying. Why does he talk so much about this? It is because both living and dying are the experiences of those who are truly consecrated to and standing with the Lord: “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Both our living and dying are to the Lord, and He is the Lord of both the dead and living.

In verse 8, living and dying to the Lord indicate a close relationship between the Lord and us. Whether we live or die, it is for the Lord, unto the Lord, and related to the Lord. Such a relationship also indicates standing for His benefit. When we receive the saints, it is to the Lord and for His benefit.

This section can be so helpful to us. Paul's heart was broad, and his stand was firm. His broad heart enabled him to receive whomever the Lord had received. His stand was so firm that both his living and dying were unto the Lord. There was no politics here. There were only love and fellowship, and in this love and fellowship were receiving and harmony.

We must realize how much church politics can hurt us. Many brothers and sisters will sacrifice their commitment from the Lord in the name of receiving others. This should not be so! We should not sacrifice a simple life unto the Lord for the sake of appeasing a weak brother, nor should we sacrifice the testimony of the body of Christ for an artificial harmony between believers. Believers should testify of the body of Christ, not of their narrow and weak self. As Paul lived unto the Lord, he would never forsake his commitment from the Lord in the name of receiving others. Yet he would also never sacrifice a broad receiving of the members of the body of Christ in order to maintain a teaching or practice.

Paul understood the point at which a broad love could become detrimental to his stand. He was able to live totally according to love and with a firm stand. This difficult balance is why, in the matter of receiving other believers, our living unto the Lord manifests true spirituality.

The Judgment Seat of God

In verse 10, Paul says that "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." 1 Corinthians 3:12–15 describes the scene of this judgment: "Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's

work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”

The judgment here is not for unbelievers but believers. In the day of judgment, fire will test and judge the quality of our life and works after believing in and receiving the Lord.

The moment described in Romans 14:12, when we give an account of ourselves to God, is the same moment in which we will be revealed by fire. It is in this moment that Christ in us will be manifested. Whatever has come out of God and is the work of God, like gold, silver, and precious stones, will remain. But whatever has come out of our fallen nature, like wood, hay, and straw, will be burned up.

The Principle of Love

Since we live under God’s judgment, we should walk according to the principle of love. This is revealed in Romans 14:13–15. The principle of love is the principle of receiving—to not put an obstacle or stumbling block in our brother’s way. If some eat only vegetables, we should receive them in love. If some esteem one day above another, we should also receive them in love. Receiving must be done in the principle of love and according to love. This is to properly receive one another according to Christ.

Receiving the Saints (2)

Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. ²⁰Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. ²¹It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. ²²The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

¹Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. ²Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. ³For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me." ⁴For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

—Romans 14:16–15:4

WORD STUDY

In Romans 14:19, Paul encourages the believers to “pursue the things that make for peace and the building up of one another.” The Greek word for “pursue,” *diōkō*, can imply the thought of persecution (Strong, #1377). The Greek word is not forced to carry the meaning of hostility and can mean “to run swiftly in order to catch some person or thing; to press on, figurative of one who in a race runs swiftly to reach the goal” (Thayer, 153).

The things we ought to so diligently pursue are for peace and building up. The Greek word used here for “building up,” *oikodomē*, means “a structure” and can be translated “building” (Strong, #3619). Here, this “building up” is used especially in a spiritual sense (Rogers, 342). We are to build up “one another,” implying that at least in this verse, Paul is referring to our action toward individuals within the church (Vincent, 3:171).

In 15:1, Paul says the strong ought to bear the weaknesses, or moral considerations, of those without strength. The Greek word used here for “to bear,” *bastazō*, means “to lift” (Strong, #941). It means not only a lifting up with the hands but also a taking up in order to carry or bear, putting something upon oneself to carry, and even to bear what is burdensome. Along these lines, it can imply sustaining, supporting, or upholding (Thayer, 98–99). This is what the stronger ought to do. According to Paul, this is their debt and obligation to the weaker (Rogers, 343).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The Church as the Kingdom of God

The emphasis of Romans 14 is the necessity in the church life to properly receive the saints. Verse 17 indicates that this proper receiving is for the kingdom of God. A receiving life is a kingdom life.

The kingdom of God mentioned in verse 17 is not abstract; it is among us. In 1 Timothy 3:15, the church is called the house of God. In Ephesians 2:19, those of God's household also have a citizenship, indicating that the church is also the kingdom of God. As the house of God, the church is filled with life. As the kingdom of God, the church is full of discipline, responsibility, and governance. This kingdom is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Building Up in Peace

Romans 14:19 says we should pursue things that make peace and things that build up one another. This building only comes in peace. To build up one another is to draw out and perfect each one's God-given portion. Such a process can only be realized in peace. Every church life needs peace because building can only occur where there is peace.

The writers of the New Testament epistles commonly opened with prayers for peace from God to the believers, and Colossians 3:15 says, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." True peace comes from Christ, is related to Christ, and is the result of taking Christ as our life and Lord. This peace is not from us or according to our understanding. It is only from Christ and in Christ.

A church life should be a life of love and peace. When any saint insists on a certain ideology, method, way, or practice, this insistence will cause the other saints to lose Christ, His peace, and a peaceful church life. When this happens, the reality of building one another up is lost.

Bearing with Others' Weaknesses

In Romans 14:20–23, Paul uses the shallow examples of eating and drinking to show a very high spiritual principle.

Food is a necessity, and eating meat is normal for many people. Even so, Paul uses it as a reminder that all of our living, behavior, and deeds are related to God's work: "Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food" (v. 20).

The work of God is spiritual, heavenly, according to the divine economy, and of eternal value. It seems unbelievable that such a mystical work could be destroyed by food—what to eat or what not to eat. However, this also testifies of how delicate the practice of the kingdom life is. The more people love the Lord, pursue Him, and serve Him, the more they also need to be watchful and careful! Paul says again, "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles" (v. 21).

Chapter 14 leads right into 15:1: "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves." Paul himself may have been a vegetarian, because he said, "Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble" (1 Cor. 8:13). Paul's declaration that he would never eat meat again testified of how clear his understanding was. It meant nothing for him to eat meat (Rom. 14:14), but his living was carefully thought through. Even for one brother, Paul would rather not eat meat. He bore with the weak conscience of the vegetarian. Paul seemed to testify here, "I myself have become a person bearing with the weaknesses of others. Even though I am strong in faith, I still need to deny myself and bear with the weaknesses of those without strength."

The "bearing" here can denote the meaning of sustaining. When we bear with the weaknesses of others, we need to supply them with what they need, especially the divine life. We should not only put their burden on our shoulders but should also accompany them through their hardship. It is especially crucial as they pass into a new spiritual stage that we bear with their weakness, supply them, and help them. Such a service is very spiritual.

When saints are weak in their spiritual understanding, this leads to a lack of confidence and responsibility before God, and it is very easy for them to seek other things to rely on. During this time, we should not become a judge saying, “You are in religion. You are keeping the law. You need to turn to the Lord and repent!” Instead, we should bear with their weakness and supply them with what they need, not pleasing ourselves.

Not Pleasing Ourselves

Romans 15:2 says, “Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.” Those who follow the Lord look to please Him, not themselves, yet the interesting result is that this leads to their willingness to please their neighbors for good, leading to edification.

Verse 3 provides us with the example of Christ. He did not please Himself. He endured reproaches and allowed the reproaches of men to fall on Him. Paul reminds us here that we should live in the same way the Lord did. The Lord suffered for us, so we in turn should suffer reproaches, being despised and detested for the sake of our brothers and sisters. Paul’s quote of Psalm 69:9 highlights this point of the Lord’s experience. If all the reproaches fell on Him, then what will our experience be as we follow Him? It is very healthy and normal for us to experience these reproaches also.

Romans 15:4 says, “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” God’s Word is our instruction, encouragement, and source of our perseverance, that we may be filled with hope.

Receiving the Saints (3)

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, ⁶so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. ⁸For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, ⁹and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written,

*“Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles,
And I will sing to Your name.”*

¹⁰Again he says,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.”

¹¹And again,

*“Praise the Lord all you Gentiles,
And let all the peoples praise Him.”*

¹²Again Isaiah says,

*“There shall come the root of Jesse,
And He who arises to rule over the Gentiles,
In Him shall the Gentiles hope.”*

¹³Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 15:5–13

WORD STUDY

In his final words on the matter of conduct between believers, Paul stresses the importance of unanimity, especially with a prayer for the granting of this by God (Romans 15:5–6). This unanimity is for the purpose of the glory of God (v. 6).

The Greek words in verse 5 for “to be of the same mind,” *phroneō to auto*, can be translated “to think to same thing” or “to be like-minded” (Vine, 371).

In verse 6, the Greek word for “one accord,” *homothumadon*, means “unanimously, with one accord” (Strong, #3661). It is composed of the Greek words *homos*, meaning “the same, together” (Strong, #3674), and *thumos*, meaning “passion” (Strong, #2372). *Homothumadon* literally means “with the same emotion or mind” and is used to stress the inner unanimity of the believers. It implies that those involved in the glorifying of God the Father have transcended their own personal desires and interests (Kittel, 5:185–186).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Being of the Same Mind

Immediately before Romans 15:5–13, Paul talked about the details of the kingdom life. Now, in Romans 15:5, he prays for the God of perseverance and encouragement to grant the brothers and sisters the same mind toward one another. Paul completely understood that the goals of peace, receiving believers, and selflessness are beyond our reach. Therefore, he prayed for us, that God, who is the God of perseverance and encouragement, would grant us “to be of the same mind with one another.”

To be “of the same mind with one another” can be translated “thinking the same thing with one another.” Paul expressed the

same thought in Philippians 2:2, where he wrote, “make my joy complete by being of the same mind.” The problems in the church life are usually due to differences of mind. Paul’s prayer here in Romans is that we would think the same thing with one another according to Christ Jesus. If our focus is not Christ, and if we cannot take the mind of Christ as our mind (Phil. 2:5), we will never have the same mind with one another, no matter how much we coordinate, request, or insist. Without the same mind, we can never satisfy God or have real peace in the church life. Such peace is realized by those who are according to Christ Jesus, take the mind of Christ Jesus as their mind, and thus think the same thing with one another.

Being in One Accord

Romans 15:6 gives a purpose to our being of the same mind: “That with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” By thinking the same thing, we are able to glorify God with one accord and with one mouth. Yet, to truly be in one accord requires sacrifice by all the brothers and sisters. All the saints should consider themselves, their opinions, and their desires as dead so that they could be united to one another and could together be a living, holy, and pleasing sacrifice to God (Rom. 12:1).

What a wonderful thing this is! When we deny our self-centered nature, we will gain Christ Himself as our center. Christ Himself must be the center, focus, and person we share with one another. The result produced by being in one accord is glorious! We will offer the same sacrifice. Our consecration will be the same. We will all be completely for the Lord and His desire. With such a common focus and center, there will be one accord among us, and God will be glorified!

The true one accord is not at all according to our natural thought. In fact, it is just the opposite of our natural preference. Generally speaking, when a Chinese emigrant meets another

Chinese emigrant in a foreign country, their hearts become joyful. When a Chinese Cantonese-speaker meets another Chinese Cantonese-speaker, their hearts become even more joyful. When a Chinese Cantonese-speaker from Shanghai meets another Chinese Cantonese-speaker from Shanghai, their hearts are even more joyful! This is human nature; people prefer others who are just like themselves. But in the church life, we are united with one another in Christ. He is the unique sacrifice, and in Him we become the one sacrifice offered to God. Whatever we might naturally be, we are all part of this sacrifice offered to God. There is no natural element here. “One accord” transcends all our differences in race, language, personality, and education.

If we are not careful in the church life, a natural one accord can tear the saints into many small sects. In other words, some are in “one accord” according to the way they meet, while others are in “one accord” according to their age. Some are in “one accord” based on a common lifestyle, while others are in “one accord” according to how long they have been saved. The result of a natural “one accord” is focusing on many things other than Christ in the church life.

A true one accord does not come from emotion, personality, nationality, race, language, culture, or age, nor does it come from a common opinion. No natural elements or experiences can result in the common sacrifice pleasing to God. The only way for us to be in one accord is to take Christ as our unique sacrifice. When we are all willing to deny ourselves, be mingled with God, and consecrate ourselves to God, we will become a common sacrifice to God in Christ. Only such a one accord can truly satisfy God.

Receiving as Christ Has Received Us

In Romans 15:7, Paul again talks about receiving: “Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the

glory of God.” The purpose of accepting, or receiving, one another is the glory of God. If Christ has received a brother, we do not have the authority or position to refuse him. No matter what kind of exercise in faith he has and no matter what kind of life-practices he holds to, he is our brother if he knows Christ as his Savior, and we should receive him. If we receive the saints in this way, God will be glorified.

The inability to receive one another will cause any group to become a narrow sect. A narrow sect is a group that is full of criticisms and judgments about others, and those in such a group think of themselves as the only right and healthy ones. If we understand how broad and rich Christ is, we would dare not boast about ourselves. At the same time, we must understand that receiving people does not mean receiving their teachings. Receiving a person is one thing, while following the Lord, walking with Him ourselves, and living out His testimony is another thing.

The Reconciling Ministry of Christ

Romans 15:8 begins a section of verses regarding the Gentiles’ praising and glorifying of God. This is made possible by Jesus Christ becoming a servant to the circumcision (v. 8). In Romans, the gospel of God not only concerns judicial redemption and organic salvation, but also the testimony gained by God through His economy. Christ has accomplished all the requirements of the law and commandments, has become the reality of all the Levitical sacrifices, and has caused the uncircumcised Gentiles to glorify God through their enjoyment of the gospel. He entrusted Peter with the gospel to the circumcised, and He entrusted Paul with the gospel to the uncircumcised (Gal. 2:7–8). Yet Christ is the great New Testament minister (Heb. 8:2, 6). He reconciles all people to God (Col. 1:20). He not only confirms the promises God gave to the fathers but also causes the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy.

In Romans 15:10–12, Paul quotes the words of the Old Testament to testify that the reconciliation between Jews, Gentiles, and God was brought about by the ministry of Christ. Not only will the Gentiles praise God, but they will rejoice with His people! Jewish and Gentile believers will together rejoice, praise God, and become a testimony of oneness in His economy!

Abounding in Hope

Romans 15:13 says that God is a God of hope, He can fill us with all joy and peace, and we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. This hope is living and organic, and it is related to our receiving of one another.

Why do we so often lack this abundant hope? It is because we are not broad enough in our receiving of one another. Abundant peace, joy, and hope come from properly receiving one another, and all three are in proportion to our receiving capacity. Too often, we receive believers only if they are similar to us in words and deeds. However, if we can receive them simply because they are our brothers or sisters, an inner rejoicing will be produced, and we will abound in joy, peace, and hope.

SECTION EIGHT

A MATURE
SERVANT OF THE
LORD
&
A HEALTHY
CHURCH LIFE

Paul's Confidence

And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another.

—Romans 15:14

WORD STUDY

Romans 15:14 begins with the word “and,” translated from the Greek word *de*, a primary particle that has many uses in the Greek language. One of the ways this word is used is to mark a transition to something new, distinguished from what preceded it (Thayer, 125). This verse may mark the beginning of Paul’s conclusion to the epistle (Alford, 2:460).

The Greek word used here for “convinced,” *peothō*, means “to persuade, to have confidence, to be confident” (Vine, 121). K. Wuest expands Paul’s use of the word here to mean, “I have been completely persuaded with the result that I have arrived at a settled conviction” (Wuest, 1:248).

Paul is convinced of three things—that the saints in Rome are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to admonish one another. The Greek word used here for “admonish,” *noutheteō*, comes from the Greek word *nous*, which means “the mind” (Strong, #3563). *Noutheteō* literally means

“to put in mind” and implies caution (warning) or gentle rebuking (Strong, #3560). This word implies the presence of opposition, and if there is opposition, there is a possibility and danger of turning aside. It is this ability to admonish that provides a way for a brother or sister to be led back from a false way (Rogers, 343).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Romans 15:14 begins the conclusion of the whole book of Romans, which focuses on the accomplishment of the gospel, that is, the healthy effect produced by the gospel of God. The gospel of God first produced the apostle Paul’s faith and confidence in the believers in Rome (v. 14), which will be covered in this chapter. Second, it produced Paul’s testimony regarding his ministering of the gospel (vv. 15–24). Third, it produced Paul’s burden for the Israelites (vv. 25–33). Finally, it produced a mature servant and a healthy church life (16:1–24).

Confidence in the Church

The book of Romans shows us that the gospel of God objectively justifies all who believe. Furthermore, it subjectively operates and has a certain effect in them. The operation of the gospel brings sinners who are under the wrath of God to justification, sanctification, and eventually transformation to be functioning members of the body of Christ. As believers, how do we know if the gospel has operated in us? How can we know if we have been constituted with the gospel? To answer these questions, we should firstly examine our confidence in the church. In other words, do we have assurance regarding the operation of the gospel in the church?

What is confidence in the church? Christians who do not have assurance regarding the abundant operation of the

gospel in the church will only see trouble wherever they serve. A person who is confident in the operation of the gospel will instead see the work of the Holy Spirit, and a person who is fully constituted with the gospel will have the ability to appreciate the process. This does not mean they ignore the shortcomings in the church life. However, they appreciate all of the Lord's work in the church. Without this ability to appreciate, we will lack faith in the gospel no matter where we serve. Without faith in the gospel's operation, we will never be burdened for the church.

There is a connection between the constitution of the gospel in us and our ability to appreciate spiritual things. The more the gospel is constituted in us, the more our natural opinions will be dealt with. The ability to appreciate the church life is something produced by the Lord in us. Likewise, confidence in the church is also produced by the Lord in us. We should allow the Lord to teach us how to appreciate, give thanks for, and admire all of the work He is doing in His church.

Those who are fully assured regarding the gospel's operation and who have full confidence in the church will always speak words of encouragement to the saints. We should learn to speak such words of encouragement to one another in our local churches. We should be confident that our words are a blessing to others. Our words can help others love the Lord more, magnify His name more, give more of themselves to Him and His church, and even feel that it is indeed the most valuable thing in the world to follow Him. If a local church is filled with such encouraging words from the lips of all the saints, God's blessing to that church will be very great.

The Virtues of the Saints

In Romans 15:14, Paul wrote that he was confident concerning the saints in Rome. His character was so constituted with the gospel that whenever he saw a church,

he saw the many virtues of the saints. He was even confident that they possessed such virtues in abundance! Here, Paul mentions their virtues in three aspects: goodness, knowledge, and the ability to admonish.

Goodness and Knowledge

Goodness not only means good behavior but also a living out of Christ. The saints who live by the Spirit become those who live out all the virtues of Christ. They are “full of goodness.” People are full of goodness when they live out Christ, who is in their spirit.

The saints in Rome were also filled with all knowledge. Their renewed mind had the capacity for rich knowledge. This was not common knowledge but knowledge relating to the revelation of God’s economy. Paul’s prayer for the believers in Colossae was that they would be “filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Col. 1:9). When Paul considered the saints in Rome, he was confident not only that God Himself filled their spirits but that their minds were also filled with the knowledge of God’s economy.

Able to Admonish One Another

The saints in Rome were not only full of goodness and all knowledge, but they were also able to admonish one another. A brother who says that he is full of God in his spirit and is full of the knowledge of God’s economy in his mind still needs something! He still needs a church life where the saints can admonish one another.

Usually, when we think about admonishment, we think of harsh words against someone’s conduct. However, the only way people have a healthy change is by their mind settling on the proper things. Admonishing deals with the settling of people’s

minds. Healthy admonishment is spiritual warfare. Paul said, "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). To truly admonish is to properly settle people's minds by taking their thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ.

Admonishment is spiritual warfare for the growth of the saints, for their function, for their healthy pursuit of the Lord, and for every brother and sister to become a blessing in the church. In the process of admonishing, we bring every thought into captivity to settle minds on Christ and God's economy. By settling on these, the purpose and living of the saints can be totally related to Christ and God's economy.

Unfortunately, our admonishing is often far from this. Many of us do not know how to properly admonish, and we often even admonish others for the wrong reasons. Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed the Lord, was a man of admonishment. He said to the woman who poured her costly perfume on Jesus, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?" (John 12:5). Jesus said to him, "Let her alone" (v. 7). Judas had not given a true admonition. A true admonition is one with God and is for people's minds to be properly settled on Christ and God's economy.

Once a person's mind is properly settled, it must then be set on the spirit. The mind set on the spirit is life and peace (Rom. 8:6). A mind related to the spirit becomes a mind obeying Christ. Such a mind will be in one accord with God's thinking. When we serve others, we should fight for them in the presence of the Lord, praying for their spirits to be full of God, for their thoughts to be full of God's economy, and for their minds to be properly settled on Christ and God's economy.

Paul praises the character, knowledge, and living of the saints in Rome. A healthy church must be full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and full of mutual admonishing. If these three are present, the saints will be healthy and will have a healthy living before the Lord.

Ministering the Gospel of God

But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, ¹⁶to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 15:15–16

WORD STUDY

In Romans 15:16, Paul calls himself a “minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.” The Greek word used here for “minister,” *leitourgos*, means “a public servant,” whether serving in the temple, a worshiper of God, or a benefactor of man (Strong, #3011). Paul describes his function as that of “ministering as a priest the gospel of God.” The Greek word used for “ministering as a priest,” *hierourgeō*, is a compound of *hieron*, meaning “a sacred place” (Strong, #2411), and *ergon*, meaning “labor, work” (Strong, #2041). *Hierourgeō* literally means “holy work or labor” and denotes ministering and serving as a priest (Vincent, 3:174).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The gospel produced not only Paul's faith and confidence in the believers in Rome (see chapter 187), but also his personal testimony regarding his ministering of the gospel of God.

A Servant of the Lord

Romans 15:15 is a special word given by Paul to the believers. It seems he wanted to remind them that he had received the grace of God. Paul was not only confirming his trust in them but also encouraging their appreciation of him.

Servants of the Lord should be admired by others. If no one admires them, they will not have a ministry. It was healthy for the apostle Paul to appreciate the church, and it was likewise healthy for the church to appreciate the apostle. How valuable other people consider our lives is an indicator of how healthy our service is. Our service will not be effective if others feel that we are common and have nothing worthy of admiration.

In verse 16, Paul begins to lay out his testimony. When Paul talked about the Roman believers in verse 14, he affirmed their spiritual health. They were healthy in character, in knowledge, and in living. Even so, he still had something to write to them regarding himself (v. 15). First, he reminded them that because of the grace given to him, God had made him a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, and second, that he was a priest for the gospel of God.

The grace of God is not only for our enjoyment but also for the forming of our ministry. A person who loves reading may not be a scholarly person, and most people only consider reading as a pastime or enjoyment. Yet, some are constituted by means of reading to become scholars. This is the same principle with a ministry. Paul not only enjoyed the grace of God, but by this grace, he was constituted to have a ministry.

All full-time servants of the Lord should realize that the value of their service lies in the forming of a ministry that can bear a divine commitment. Compared with this divine commitment, a desire to become a high ranking official or wealthy entrepreneur is worthless. Only serving the Lord is glorious!

However, if serving the Lord full time becomes a career, it is the most miserable career in the world. Divine things cannot be accomplished by our natural ability. If those who serve full time are not watchful, the hurt they receive while serving can be unbelievable. However, if they are watchful and sanctify their time unto God, they can pray more, read more of God's Word, pursue more of the truth, care for more saints, and give the Lord more opportunities to teach them spiritual lessons for spiritual growth. They can be constituted to have a ministry. Because it results in the forming of a ministry, serving the Lord in a full-time capacity is more valuable than anything else a person can do.

A Commitment and Mission

Paul talks about grace in Romans 15:15, and in verse 16, he talks about the priestly ministering of the gospel of God. By the grace of God, Paul was constituted to have a ministry, was made a priest of the gospel of God, and was committed with the gospel of God. Very few people, even very few Christians, are clear about their commitment and mission. Our ministry should be developed in the grace of the Lord, and by His mercy, we should feel that we have been sent on a mission and that the Lord has committed something to us. We should be full of power and have impact and influence on the lives of other people. In prayer before the Lord, we should struggle and fight for this.

Paul had a realization about himself: he was an apostle to the Gentiles (11:13), a minister of Christ Jesus (15:16), and a priest of the gospel of God (v. 16). He had a calling,

a commitment, a mission, a purpose, and a goal. His commitment was divine, and all his living, struggling, and pursuing were for the accomplishment of the divine economy. In these verses, it seems Paul was trying to get the saints in Rome to take note of him. Who was he? He was an apostle to the Gentiles, a minister of Christ Jesus, and a priest of the gospel of God. What a life! What an existence! Such a life is the highest, the most heavenly, the most glorious, and the most valuable!

Ministering as a Priest the Gospel of God

The meaning of the Greek word for “minister” in Romans 15:16 is “public servant.” Paul considered himself a servant to all Gentiles, not only a select few. As a public servant to the Gentiles, he was ministering as a priest the gospel of God. He always felt that he owed the gospel to everyone he met.

Ministering the gospel of God is not only related to God but also to His house and testimony. Paul’s work was to build the churches of Christ in order to produce the testimony God desires. As a priest, he brought God to people and people to God. He was a priest who supplied and dispensed Christ to the Gentiles for them to be filled and saturated with Christ’s divine elements. By this dispensing, God’s desired testimony could be produced on the earth, eventually issuing in an offering that could be “acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (v. 16).

A priest who ministers the gospel of God will feel committed to bear fruit for this offering to God. The Holy Spirit is involved in this whole process, not only in the sanctifying, but also in the bearing of this fruit. God desires to gain such priests who are one with the Holy Spirit, and who not only bring God to people through the gospel, but also present people to God as an acceptable offering.

The Apostle's Boast

Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. ¹⁸For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, ¹⁹in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. ²⁰And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; ²¹but as it is written, "They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand." ²²For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; ²³but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you ²⁴whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while.

—Romans 15:17–24

WORD STUDY

Romans 15:17–24 has been described as Paul's boast of the extent and result of his apostolic mission among the Gentiles in places no one had preached before (Alford, 2:461–462).

This mission, according to verse 18, was for “the obedience of the Gentiles.” The Greek word used here for “obedience,” *hupakoē*, means “attentive hearkening” and implies compliance or submission (Strong, #5218). This may imply obedience to the gospel (Alford, 2:462). It is the same Greek word that was used in Romans 1:5: “through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles.”

Paul’s hope in verse 24 is to see the believers in Rome on his way to Spain, so he could enjoy their company for a while. The Greek word used here for “enjoy,” *emphēthō*, means “to fill in (up), that is, to satisfy” (Strong, #1705). This word could be used of someone who was hungry and then satisfied by the filling of food (Thayer, 208). The thought could be that Paul was “hungry” to see the believers in Rome and longed to be satisfied by their company.

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Being Careful about Our Words

In Romans 15:17–19, we see a picture of what Christ accomplished through Paul. By his word and deed, in mighty signs and wonders, and in the power of the Spirit of God, the Gentiles were made obedient.

Servants of the Lord should give proper heed to their words and not speak randomly. Idle words leak life and destroy the saints. It is normal for Christians to bear fruit, but when they are full of idle words, their spiritual life leaks out, and it becomes hard for them to bear fruit. Almost all who speak idle words lack fruit.

Paul would not presume to speak of anything except what Christ had accomplished through him to make the Gentiles obedient (v. 18). Words are not insignificant. People who speak idle words may not realize how seriously their words

can hurt the body of Christ. Those who have not been dealt with by the Lord regarding their words can hurt a church beyond imagination. If there are many negative words in a church life, yet few positive words, it is an unhealthy situation. We must pay attention to our words. We should learn from Paul, whose words only came from the Lord, and who was unwilling to speak of anything else.

The Relationship between Words and Deeds

After mentioning his words, Paul also mentioned his work: “by word and deed.” His deeds were his work. Our work and our words are closely related. The kind of words we have will often decide what kind of work we have. This is because our words represent our person, our vision, and our logic. What we see and how we reason are expressed through our words.

Our words come out of our person. The higher our person is, the higher our words will be. If our words are low, it means that our person is low. A spiritual person will have spiritual words; a fleshly person will have fleshly words. Servants of the Lord must have healthy words or their work will never be healthy.

Christ not only used Paul's words and work, but also signs, wonders, and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about the obedience of the Gentiles (Rom. 15:19). The Greek word for “power,” *dunamis*, indicates an explosive power (see Strong, #1411). Because of the explosive power of the Holy Spirit in Paul's words and work, he could do many signs and wonders.

Living in Obedience

The Greek word used in Romans 15:19 for “obedience” is not the same as the word used for “subjection” in 13:1. We

should be submissive to governing authorities but obedient to the gospel. Subjection is a matter of attitude; obedience is a matter of our living. We should have the attitude of submission to governing authorities. We should have a living in obedience to Christ Jesus, in whom we believe.

Paul's Aim

According to Romans 15:19–20, Paul was determined not to build upon another man's foundation. When Paul preached the gospel, he went from city to city. If someone had preached the gospel in one city and laid a foundation, Paul simply went to another city, lest he build on an already laid foundation.

Christ Himself is the unique foundation of the church (1 Cor. 3:11). Yet, the church is also built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets (Eph. 2:20). The church can only be built up with Christ. Without Him, the church does not exist! However, in the process of building, the foundation of the church is the teaching of the apostles and prophets. Even if we preach the same Christ, who is the unique foundation, the foundation of the church is established through the teaching and work of those who preach. If someone had preached the gospel in a certain place, Paul preferred not to work there, lest he build on another's foundation.

We should have Paul's aim—going to preach the gospel in places where no one has gone to preach before. We should go to new places to help people believe in the Lord and love Him, and to raise up churches. This is the service not only of an apostle but also of all servants of the Lord. To the Lord, this service is so good. How glorious, valuable, bold, heavenly, and honorable this life is! This kind of life matches God's heart's desire and carries out His will.

Paul's Burden

In Romans 15:19, Paul says that he had fully preached the gospel from Jerusalem around to Illyricum. In verse 23, he says that he no longer has place in these regions. It is amazing that after only a few years, Paul had preached the gospel to the point that he no longer had a place to preach in these regions.

In Paul's view, not everyone in a city or area needed to hear the gospel directly from him. He was only sowing the seed of the gospel in many places, for he knew that the seed of the gospel would grow by itself. Therefore, he was very confident in saying that he had no place to preach in these regions. What a soul he had! He had fully preached the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum, and he had no place to preach in these regions anymore!

Paul's hope was to preach the gospel in Spain (v. 24), which was considered the remotest part of the world at that time. He believed the Lord's words that as soon as the gospel was preached to the whole world, the Lord Jesus would come back (Matt. 24:14; Acts 1:8). As we serve in our local church, we should tell ourselves that our lives do not only belong to one place but to the whole world! Our burden should be to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth so that the earth would be filled with the testimony of the Lord.

Paul surely focused on the building of the churches in every locality, yet he never lost his burden for gospel preaching. On the one hand, his whole heart was for the saints in Rome and for the building of the church there. On the other hand, as an apostle to the Gentiles, he hoped to go to Spain to preach the gospel. This desire must have come from his aim to preach the gospel in places where no one had preached before. By preaching the gospel in Spain, he would be accomplishing his divine commitment.

Paul's Enjoyment

Before going to Spain, Paul hoped to go to Rome. In fact, he had desired this for many years (Rom. 15:23–24). He longed to stop by Rome to fellowship with the saints there and to enjoy their company, and then to be helped on his journey by them. This enjoyment is the secret of the Lord's servants. When they go out to preach the gospel, they not only need an aim and a burden, but also a view for their enjoyment. Once they meet brothers, their heart enjoys the presence of these brothers. Their fellowship with the saints becomes their great enjoyment.

Though servants of the Lord may be sent by Him to another place to preach and labor, their heart will always remember their local saints. As soon as they see them, their heart will enjoy their company. This is very healthy and is a manifestation of the operation of life in the body of Christ. When we are not healthy, we do not want to see the saints' faces. When we are healthy, we desire fellowship with the saints and enjoy their company. This is the sweetness of a Christian life. As soon as we are with brothers and sisters, there is a sweet enjoyment in our heart.

Did the Lord allow Paul to fulfill his desire? Acts 28:15–16 tells us that Paul made it to Rome. Acts 28:30 says, "And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him." He was a prisoner at that time and could not walk about freely. Church history tells us that when he was released, he was able to travel to Spain and preach the gospel there. Hallelujah! The Lord eventually fulfilled Paul's desire.

Serving the Saints

But now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. ²⁶For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. ²⁸Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. ²⁹I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. ³⁰Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, ³¹that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; ³²so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company. ³³Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

—Romans 15:25–33

WORD STUDY

The “contribution for the poor” mentioned by Paul in verse 26 is the financial offering of the Gentile churches to the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Alford, 2:464). Paul was

likely referring to conveying this contribution as his service to the saints (v. 25). The Greek word used for “serving” in verse 25, *dakonōn*, is the active role of a *diakonos*—a servant who provides aid or service (Strong, #1249). It may refer to a very practical form of Paul’s ministry (Vincent, 3:157).

The Greek word used in verse 27 for “minister,” *leitourgeō*, implies a public service in religious functions (Strong, #3008). By using this word, which would usually be used for priestly service, Paul places the service of financial offering on the same level as the Levitical sacrificial service (Vincent, 3:176). This was an elevation of the practice of giving.

In verse 30, Paul urges the saints in Rome to strive together with him in prayers to God for him. The Greek verb translated “strive together,” *sunagōnizomai*, implies strenuous effort and was used of participants contending in the Roman games (Vincent, 3:176). The content of this prayer is revealed in verses 31–33:

1. That Paul would be rescued from the disobedient (or the unbelievers) in Judea
2. That his service in Jerusalem would prove acceptable to the saints
3. That he would come to the believers in Rome with joy

Paul may have been afraid that the hatred held against him by the Jews would render the ministrations charged to him unacceptable in the eyes of the saints (Alford, 2:465).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Paul wanted to take a contribution to Jerusalem to meet the need of the saints there. This shows that the gospel had a healthy effect on Paul. It not only produced in him a testimony regarding his ministering of the gospel (Rom. 15:15–24), but also a burden for the Israelites.

Pleased to Give

In Romans 15:26, Paul says, “Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.” Paul mentioned the churches in Macedonia many times in his letters. In 2 Corinthians, he said of the Macedonian churches “that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality” (8:2). Both the saints in Jerusalem and the saints in Macedonia were poor. Our natural logic would lead us to conclude that there was no need to transfer money from Macedonia to Jerusalem because both were poor. However, Paul’s logic was different. He considered that the poorer we are, the more we should give. Even today, if we are all poor, we should have some fellowship in finance. In other words, together we should contribute money in order that we could trust in the riches of the Lord.

It was divine and heavenly logic for the saints in Macedonia, in their deep poverty, to contribute to the poor in Jerusalem. The saints in Philippi, one of the leading cities in Macedonia, did not have much wealth. In order to contribute money, they surely needed to pay a price. To give to the poor in Jerusalem, they may have had to save money out of their normal monthly rationing. Yet Paul, through his burden, teaching, and help, produced a joy among them. This joy brought in fellowship between the Gentile churches and the saints in Jerusalem.

Remembering Our Source

Romans 15:27 says that the Gentiles ought to minister to the Israelites in material things, for they have shared in their spiritual things. Humanly speaking, the highest lesson is to remember our source and to remember the heritage we have been blessed with. The source we most easily forget is our

parents. They pay the highest price for us, yet we often do not appreciate them. In our human life, to learn this lesson is extremely noble and high.

Likewise, our highest virtue as a Christian involves remembering our source. Paul even told Timothy, “You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them” (2 Tim. 3:14). Since salvation came from the Jews, and because, by God’s mercy, the Gentiles are grafted into the cultivated olive tree, the Gentiles should be full of appreciation toward Israel. To Paul, the saints in Macedonia and Achaia were indebted to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, and he considered their financial contribution payment of such debt. Paul seemed to say here, “Christians cannot forget their source. Since you Gentiles partake in the spiritual heritage of the Jews, you should supply them with material things. This is very healthy and normal.”

The Lord’s Hand on Paul

In Romans 15:28–29, Paul says, “When I have...put my seal on this fruit of theirs...I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.” Because Paul had rich experiences of the fullness of the blessing of Christ, he could share the abundant grace of Christ with others wherever he went.

Acts 21 describes what happened after Paul wrote to the Romans. He finished his third journey of gospel preaching among the Gentiles and went to Jerusalem with the contribution of the Gentile churches. James and the elders in Jerusalem told him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law” (Acts 21:20). Immediately, Paul realized that he was in a hard situation. James gave him a task to prove that he still kept the Law of Moses: to join and help four men purify themselves in the temple (vv. 23–24).

Paul had strictly kept the Law of Moses before believing in the Lord, so his conscience may have felt peaceful in this practice of purification. Indeed, his conscience was free in regard to living as one under the Law (1 Cor. 9:20). However, his helping of the four men to keep this tradition did not match his teaching and was different from the New Testament economy. Therefore, the Holy Spirit hindered him from completing the task, and he was bound and sent to Rome.

Paul had written to the Romans of his desire to see them, yet his desire was fulfilled by traveling to Rome in chains, rather than as a free man. This is the wonderful part of following the Lord. No matter how we plan, consider, hope, and expect, the result is never according to our way. The Lord's leading is very wonderful. He may fulfill our desires, yet it will not be according to our ways, expectations, or plans. The Lord will accomplish His will in His own way.

Paul's Urging of the Saints

Paul understood how significant it was to be an apostle to the Gentiles, to go to Jerusalem, and then to preach the gospel to those in Spain. Therefore, in Romans 15:30–31, he urges the saints in Rome to strive together with him in prayers to God. These prayers were that he might be rescued from those in Judea who did not believe the gospel, and that his service for Jerusalem might be acceptable to the saints.

Paul was reminding the saints in Rome that because he was a servant of Christ Jesus and a priest of the gospel of God in order to preach the gospel, including in Spain, they needed to pray for him. Yet Paul did not ask for prayer for his body or spirit. His problems were with the unbelievers among the Jews. The saints in Rome needed to pray that Paul would not be killed! He also was concerned for the saints in Jerusalem. The saints in Rome needed to pray that the believers in Jerusalem would accept Paul's service when he arrived.

Paul's Service for the Body of Christ

No matter where Paul went, his situation was not easy. Not only did the unbelieving Jews want to kill him, but even the believing Jews gave him trouble! James may have thought, "If Paul were not around, we would not have so much trouble." James may have considered things in a broad way. He may have thought, "There are many people who are zealous for the Law in Jerusalem. If they go out to teach men to be zealous for the Law, they could conquer the whole world. Yet Paul's work among the Gentiles makes the work in Jerusalem so hard. If he were not here, we would not be so limited!"

The hardest thing to know in following the Lord is not how to work but how to survive. Paul's survival was harder than we may think. The unbelieving Jews wanted to kill him and the saints in Jerusalem may not have wanted to accept his service. In this situation, why did he insist so strongly on going to Jerusalem? This was his service; he could not help but go. He was not sending the contribution of the Gentile saints to Jerusalem for the money itself but as a manifestation of brotherly love. He was an apostle to the Gentiles, yet the body of Christ, made of Jews and Gentiles, is only one. He had to go to Jerusalem for the sake of the body of Christ, for the body's benefit, and to maintain good fellowship among the churches. He suffered both inwardly and outwardly. Even in his suffering, he became a pattern for us, because even in such a hard situation, he still joyfully served the Lord.

Paul's Desire for the Believers

Verse 32 gives a third and final aspect of the prayer Paul urged the Roman believers to share in. The first aspect was that he might be delivered from those who were not obedient among the Jews. The second aspect was that his fellowship in Jerusalem might be sweet and that his service might be

accepted. The third and final aspect was that his heart's desire and burden might be fulfilled. This would come by eventually going to the saints in Rome to enjoy rest with them.

Verse 33 is Paul's prayer for the believers in Rome: "Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen." Peace is mentioned often in the final chapters of Romans. This is because the gospel of God is experienced and realized in the God of peace. Thank the Lord that our God is the God of peace!

A Mature Servant of the Lord (1)

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; ²that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well. ³Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; ⁵also greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epaphroditus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. ⁶Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. ⁷Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.

—Romans 16:1–7

WORD STUDY

The Greek word in Romans 16:1 for “commend,” *sunistēmi*, means “to set together, to introduce, to stand near” and can also be translated “approve, stand with” (Strong, #4921). This word shows how much Paul honored Phoebe, who is described by him as a servant of the church at Cenchrea. The Greek word used here for “servant,” *diakonos*, can also be

translated “minister” (Strong, #1249). Paul also encourages the saints to “help her.” The Greek word used here for “help,” *parastēte*, means “to stand beside, to help, to assist, to stand beside in order to hold up” (Rogers, 344)

Paul introduces Andronicus and Junias in verse 7, who were “outstanding among the apostles.” There are two ways to interpret this phrase. The first way is that they were outstanding as apostles themselves. The second way is that they were outstanding to the apostles, meaning they were well spoken of by the twelve apostles. As long as “apostles” in this verse are taken in a wider sense than the Twelve, as “apostles” are in Acts 14:4, 14:14, and 1 Thessalonians 2:6, then there is no doubt or problem counting these two as apostles (Alford, 2:467).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The conclusion of the book of Romans focuses on the accomplishment of the gospel, that is, the healthy effect produced by the gospel of God. This gospel first produced the apostle Paul’s faith and confidence in the believers in Rome (v. 14). Second, it produced Paul’s testimony regarding his ministering of the gospel (vv. 15–24). Third, it produced Paul’s burden for the believing Jews in Jerusalem (vv. 25–33). Last, it produced a mature servant and a healthy church life (16:1–24).

A Chapter of Greetings

Romans 16 is a chapter of greetings. Paul greets someone in almost every verse of the chapter, showing us that the reality of a spiritual man may be different from our concept. According to our concept, Paul should have said something so high and mystical at the end of this letter. However, he did not write in this way. Instead, he simply greeted the saints.

We may wonder how Paul knew the saints in Rome so well. He was very clear concerning their character, experiences, and condition before the Lord. In whatever way Paul was able to become so clear regarding the believers in Rome, God sovereignly portrayed such a sweet picture in this chapter. This picture shows us both a mature servant of the Lord and a number of healthy saints. This is the composition of a healthy church life—healthy servants and healthy saints.

Honesty toward the Church

It is important to realize that everything Paul says in this chapter is completely honest, not political. There are surely many characteristics of a mature servant of the Lord: useful in the Lord's hand, spiritually healthy, a blessing to the church, able to operate in a proper way, and able to produce the testimony desired by the Lord. Yet, before any of these can be discussed, a servant must be completely honest toward the church. Paul was such a mature servant who loved the church, did not play politics with the saints, and presented himself purely and honestly before the brothers and sisters.

It is not easy to learn honesty. When we live in a church life, it is easy to criticize others, promote ourselves, and brag about certain people or things. Yet, it is hard for us to be honest. Servants of the Lord may quickly come up with plans or schemes to deal with people, things, and matters related to a church. Very few have learned the lesson that we should never lose our honesty toward the church, no matter what kind of situation the church is in and no matter how differently others minister.

The most basic characteristic of a servant of the Lord is honesty. A servant of the Lord should not be crafty or political in working with the church or the saints but should simply be honest. Such honesty can bring much blessing to

the church. We should learn the lesson of honesty in our local church, just as Paul was honest toward the saints in Rome.

Honoring Other Servants of the Lord

A mature servant of the Lord is not only honest but also honors other servants of the Lord. Here in Romans, Paul mentions Phoebe to the saints in Rome: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea” (16:1). With such an introduction, Paul honored this sister who served her local church.

What made Phoebe so special? There may have been a few sisters like her in every church at that time. However, Paul commended her and honored her. He did this because she was a servant of the church at Cenchrea. A healthy church life will always have some servants, or ministers. When mature servants of the Lord see the ministers who serve in each local church, they will be full of honor toward them.

Paul was very careful and sober when he talked about the churches. When he saw that there was a sister in Cenchrea who served the church, an honor for her rose up within him, and he commended her in all honesty. Paul seemed to say, “Saints in Rome, let me commend a certain sister to you. Even though she is not famous, she has served much. She serves and ministers to the church at Cenchrea.” Such a short word is touching. It may seem common, but it is very special coming from the apostle Paul.

Our Receiving in a Manner Worthy of the Saints

Concerning Phoebe, Paul asked the believers in Rome to “receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints”

(Rom. 16:2). Our receiving needs to be in a manner worthy of the character of the saints: proper and decent.

Properly receiving and giving hospitality is not a small matter. It may not be proper to give an old brother a mattress on the floor or to ask him to share a bathroom with twenty young brothers. I knew a married couple who always allowed the guests to sleep in the master bedroom. If the guests protested, the couple would say, “If you sleep in the living room, you will not have privacy. We feel as comfortable sleeping in the living room as in the bedroom. If you sleep in the bedroom, you will rest well.”

We should learn to provide hospitality that matches the great value of the saints. Hospitality is not only important, but it is also a blessing. If every family in the church gives hospitality in a manner worthy of the saints, the saints’ spirits will be refreshed and their hearts will be restful.

Receiving Help from the Saints

Romans 16:2 continues, “and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.” Phoebe was, by Paul’s description, not only a minister of the church but also a helper of many people, including Paul himself. Even Paul needed help from others.

A brother who labored and served many churches once testified of the saints’ help for him. He could not be with his sick wife while he was traveling and serving the saints, so two or three sisters began to attentively take care of her. This care was needed help. On the one hand, the sisters were taking care of this brother’s wife. On the other hand, this care was also a help to the brother, allowing him to serve the Lord without anxiety. A mature servant of the Lord must be able to receive needed help from the saints.

Honoring the Order in Christ

A mature servant of the Lord also holds fast to the order in Christ. Paul continues, “Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me” (Rom. 16:7). The apostle Paul, who was full of spiritual understanding, who had high and deep revelation, and who was exceptionally manifested in operation, mentions two people: Andronicus and Junias. It is surprising how Paul talks about these saints, who are otherwise unknown to us. There is no mention of these two outside of this section, yet Paul says that they were outstanding among the apostles and were in Christ before him! This is very touching.

Andronicus and Junias were in Christ before Paul, yet I believe that Paul spiritually outgrew them. Though Paul raised up many churches, we do not know of any church raised up by these two. However, Paul’s honor for them went far beyond their results, revelation, riches, growth, function, and manifestation. His attitude seemed to be, “If there is a brother who was in Christ before me, he is in front of me. He will always be in front of me, no matter how rich his revelation, how manifested his function, or how prevailing his life.”

Paul honored God’s sovereign arrangement. No matter how mature in the Lord he became, he appreciated Andronicus and Junias. They were his fellow prisoners, outstanding among the apostles, and in Christ before him. Therefore, Paul warmly greeted them.

The principle of honoring those who are older in the Lord than us is not easy to learn. It is easy for us to commend and praise those who are younger than us, yet it is hard to do the same for those who were in Christ before us. This is because we lack humility. To praise those who are younger is easy because we can still feel superior to them. Yet we do not need to feel abased when we commend an older or more

mature brother. We must learn, like Paul, how to properly honor those who are before us.

To learn this lesson is a matter of our growth. We become discouraged if we think that we have not grown enough, but we become proud if we think that we have grown significantly. If we do not grow, we feel useless, yet when we grow, we look down on others. None of these are healthy. As we grow, we must learn to properly honor the saints we are with, especially those who were before us in Christ.

Honoring Other Apostles

Paul's words that Andronicus and Junias were outstanding among the apostles implies that there were many apostles in Paul's time. There were false apostles (2 Cor. 11:13), yet there were also many true apostles in addition to the Twelve. Of these true apostles, here Paul mentions two, Andronicus and Junias, who were outstanding among those who had been sent by God to preach the gospel.

Though Paul was given a work from the Lord (Acts 13:2), with so many apostles on the earth at that time, there must have been more than one work. These works, in principle, were in one fellowship, so Paul was not bothered. Instead, he was joyful in hope that more apostles would be raised up to establish more churches and further develop the Lord's work.

These verses are so good! Paul commended Phoebe, who was a minister in the church at Cenchrea, to the saints in Rome. He also encouraged them to receive her for the sake of the Lord and in a manner worthy of saints. How sweet this is! Paul also greeted his kinsmen and fellow prisoners, Andronicus and Junias, who were outstanding among the apostles and were in Christ before him. Paul truly honored them and felt that the other saints should honor them as well. Indeed, Paul was a healthy and mature servant of the Lord.

A Mature Servant of the Lord (2)

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; ⁵also greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epaphroditus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. ⁶Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. ⁷Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me. ⁸Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys my beloved. ¹⁰Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus. ¹¹Greet Herodion, my kinsman. Greet those of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord. ¹²Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine. ¹⁴Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them. ¹⁵Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them....

²¹Timothy my fellow worker greets you, and so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen.

—Romans 16:3–15, 21

WORD STUDY

Romans 16 is filled with the names of people Paul knew. In 16:3–15, these people include his coworkers (vv. 3, 9), kinsmen (vv. 7, 11), and households he was familiar with (vv. 10, 11). The names include those who worked in the Lord (v. 12), those who worked hard (vv. 6, 12), and those who were simply beloved and chosen (vv. 5, 8, 12, 13). The names include both men and women, most of whom seem to have been relatively active among the saints in Rome. In verses 3–15, twenty-six names are specifically mentioned by Paul, two-thirds of which are Greek (Morgan, 238). Paul’s presentation of these faithful saints, according to Martin Luther, was for us to see and imitate them (Luther, 221).

Revelation and Application

The book of Romans is centered around the gospel of God, and now at the end of Romans, the result of the gospel is presented. In chapter 16, this result includes a mature servant of the Lord and a well-constituted and healthy church life.

Appreciating His Coworkers

In his greeting, Paul mentions his coworkers (Rom. 16:3). What characterizes a coworker? According to Paul, his coworkers Prisca and Aquila were willing to risk their own necks and die for him (v. 4).

The word “coworker” is very sweet. No relationship on the whole earth is more heavenly than that between coworkers. When we consider coworkers, we should have a sweet feeling within us: “These people have the same life and the same soul. They are for one another and are willing to risk their necks for one another.”

Honoring Those Who Labor

A mature servant of the Lord honors those who labor for the saints. Romans 16:6 says, “Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.” Verse 12 also says, “Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord.” These two verses show us three levels of working, or laboring. The first level is “working hard,” which was the labor of Mary. The second level is “working in the Lord,” which was the labor of Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Their labor was in and unto the triune God. The third level is “working hard in the Lord,” which was the labor of Persis.

A mature servant of the Lord knows that the testimony of the church is very much related to the labor of the sisters. When Paul talked about those laboring in the church, he did not mention brothers, only sisters. Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis are all names of women! In other words, it seems that the brothers had no portion in laboring for the church.

In principle, sisters labor more than brothers, whether in the home or in the church. Once the sisters love the Lord, the church is healthy. When they do not love the Lord, it is hard for the church to be built up. If, by the Lord’s mercy, they are willing to accept a burden and labor in the Lord, the testimony of the church will be strong.

We have seen that mature servants of the Lord should be honest with the church, should honor other servants of the Lord, and should honor the order established by the Lord (see chapter 191). Servants of the Lord must also have the same life and labor as their coworkers and should be able to see the saints’ labor in the Lord. Such labor is full of love in caring for and serving their fellow saints, and is a source of blessing to the church.

Paul indeed paid a great deal of attention to the work of the saints. He did not take their labor for granted, but remembered it in his heart. He was able to clearly see the

labor of sisters and knew how hard they worked. Mary worked hard, Tryphaena and Tryphosa worked in the Lord, and Persis worked hard in the Lord. Mature servants of the Lord must see the laboring of the saints. If they cannot, they will not see the Lord's blessing in the church.

Recognizing the Work of the Holy Spirit

A mature servant of the Lord also knows the work of the Holy Spirit on people. Romans 16:10 begins, "Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ." This phrase, "approved in Christ," shows that Paul not only saw the labor of the saints but also the work of the Holy Spirit on them. Even though the Holy Spirit does so much work on another person, if we don't recognize this work, it will be lost due to our inability to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. A servant of the Lord must be very sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit. Those who have no feeling in this matter can never serve the Lord.

We not only need to learn to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit, but also to cooperate with the Spirit's work. For example, there was a newly saved brother who stood up to pray in a church meeting. His prayer was very touching, and it was evident that he touched the Lord in his heart. We dared not predict how the Holy Spirit would lead him next or what He desired to do in him. However, it was clear that the Holy Spirit had done a very significant work in his heart. Imagine if the brothers or sisters in that meeting behaved as if they did not hear or care about his prayer. Or imagine if the saints just left for their homes after the meeting was over. If such a thing had happened, this brother would probably have been lost. We need to recognize, cooperate with, and know the work of the Holy Spirit in people. We need to know how to have fellowship, how to pray more, and how to seek the Lord more. Then, the Holy Spirit will have a way to do His wonderful work in the saints we are with, one by one.

There were many saints in Rome, yet Paul greeted them one by one and knew not only their names but also their characteristics! When Paul greeted Apelles, he seemed to say, “Brother Apelles is so good! How do I know that he is good? It is because he has been approved in Christ.” We do not know how Apelles was approved. He may have been imprisoned for the sake of the gospel, or he may have passed through a certain hard environment or situation. However, to say he was approved indicates that he had gone through some trials, yet he still loved the Lord. This surely was only by the work of the Holy Spirit on him, which Paul saw and recognized.

Honoring God’s Sovereign Arrangements

Romans 16:7 begins, “Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners.” Why did Paul mention his kinsmen? Hadn’t he heard the words of the Lord Jesus, that His brothers, sisters, and mother were whoever does the will of the Father in heaven (Matt. 12:50)? Some people read these words of the Lord and think they should abandon all their family relationships. However, Paul’s words here show us that there must be a healthy recognition of God’s sovereign arrangement. Paul mentioned his kinsmen because he knew that these relationships were sovereignly arranged by God. Since God has arranged who our kinsmen are, we should accept and appreciate this and say, “Thank the Lord that I have such kinsmen!”

Romans 16:10 continues, “Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus.” People usually do not care who is in what household, yet Paul did. Aristobulus might have been a rich man of a noble family with many family members and slaves in his household, and many of his household may have believed in the Lord together with him. Paul made sure to recognize this by greeting them as a household.

Paul again says in verse 11, “Greet Herodion, my kinsman. Greet those of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord.” Paul was very clear that some people were his kinsmen, while others were of someone’s household. His greetings to them show that he honored the healthy family relationships that were sovereignly arranged by God.

Paul paid much attention not only to family relationships but also to social relationships. Paul’s high spiritual understanding was that God’s sovereignty reached even his social relationships. For example, as a prisoner he preached the gospel to his jailer in Philippi; this was not a family relationship but a social one created by circumstances. Paul said to the jailer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). His heavenly logic was that God’s work begins from households. Once people believe in the Lord, their households will also eventually believe.

Someone may say to this, “My family members do not believe in the Lord. What can I do?” I would tell such ones that their lack of absoluteness for the Lord is what prevents their family members from believing. If someone is willing to die for the Lord, to give everything to the Lord, and to be absolute for the Lord, is it really possible for that household to continue in unbelief? The more we love the Lord, are absolute for Him, and consecrate ourselves to Him, the more our family members will wonder, “Who is this One my loved one believes in? If this One is real, I will also believe!” We should not look down on family or social relationships because they are arranged and ordained by the Lord.

Honoring Every Saint

Romans 16:13 says, “Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord.” Another way to translate this phrase is, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord” (NKJV®). It seems that Rufus was not

a special brother, because Paul did not mention any specific characteristic. However, Paul still felt that every brother is precious, so he added “a choice man in the Lord.” Paul was full of appreciation when he mentioned Phoebe, Mary, Prisca, Aquila, Andronicus, and Junias, and at last, he called Rufus “a choice man in the Lord.” Rufus may not have had anything special about him, but at least the Lord had chosen him. There is not one person in the church who is not chosen by the Lord. Everyone is so precious in the Lord’s eyes, whether they are useful and manifested in gifts or common and not particularly gifted.

Paul not only greeted Rufus but also his mother: “Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine” (v. 13). The household of Rufus must have been helped by Paul, and the mother of Rufus must have cared for Paul and treated him as if he were her own son. In the church life, very few people can point to an older sister and say, “She is not only the mother of a brother here but also my mother.” Some older sisters in the church life are extremely capable of taking care of others. When young people go to them, they will find out that these sisters are like a mother, serving the children of God.

Paul had a very spiritual view of the church. An immature person is full of criticism when looking at a church. A mature and approved person is full of worship to the Lord when looking at the same church. Mature believers will see how some individual saints are approved, how some bear much fruit in the Lord, how some have special portions, and how some are simply chosen by the Lord. They will see how some are willing to die for the servants of the Lord, and how some are like mothers to the servants of the Lord. If we would see the church in this way, we would say, “Lord, Your riches, blessing, and work accomplished by the Holy Spirit are so evident in these saints! You deserve all the worship! You have done so much in Your church!”

Final Greetings

In Romans 16:14–15, Paul greets many saints: Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brethren who are with them; Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. These verses bring so much joy. There were many saints in Rome whose character and gifts may not have been manifested, yet each one was lovely, and together they bore the testimony of the Lord.

Paul greeted so many saints in Rome. He could say something of those who had ministries, something of those who had experiences, and something of those who labored. Even if someone was not so manifested, Paul could still say that he was chosen by the Lord. Even more, there were some saints who were joined and served the church together, so Paul also put them together in his greeting.

Finally, Paul speaks of the fellow workers by his side. Verse 21 says, “Timothy my fellow worker greets you, and so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen.” This shows that even in the midst of so much laboring, a mature servant of the Lord should not forget the fellow workers who are with him.

What a picture this passage of verses gives to us of the saints in Rome and Paul’s interaction with them! Let us tell the Lord, “May Your church be full of the work of Your Holy Spirit, full of greetings, full of appreciation, and full of honor. I wish to become a mature servant to serve You in Your church.”

A Warning from a Mature Servant

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. ¹⁷Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. ¹⁸For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting. ¹⁹For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. ²⁰The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

—Romans 16:16–20

WORD STUDY

In Romans 16:17, Paul warns the church of those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the learned teaching. The Greek word used here for “contrary,” *para*, has a wide range of meaning; here, it likely means “beyond, opposed to” (Strong, #3844). Paul instructs believers to “turn away,” *ekklinō*, from such people. This Greek word means “to come away from someone, to shun, to avoid” (Rogers, 345).

In verse 19, Paul adds that he wants the believers to be “wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.” The Greek word used here for “wise,” *sophos*, means “skilled, expert” and can denote wisdom in terms of knowledge or practical sense (Thayer, 582). The Greek word used here for “innocent,” *akeraios*, was used by the Greeks to describe unalloyed metal, or wine that was unmixed with water. It literally means “unmixed, pure.” In the New Testament, it is often used metaphorically to refer to what is guileless or sincere (Vine, 291).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

In Romans 16:16, Paul not only told the saints in Rome to greet one another, but also that all the churches of Christ greeted them. Greeting one another is something we should learn and practice. Right after this greeting, however, Paul also had some words of warning: “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them” (v. 17).

Verses 3–15 show us that Paul, a mature servant of the Lord, was full of appreciation and thankfulness, and was able to see in each saint the work of the Holy Spirit. In verse 17, however, he also had a very strong warning for the saints. Paul was not merely a nice man who only spoke pleasing words to the church, nor was he merely a harsh man who only warned people wherever he went. No, he had both kind words and words of warning. A mature servant of the Lord can properly present himself among the saints with both of these aspects.

Those Who Cause Dissensions and Hindrances

The ones Paul warned against (those causing dissensions and hindrances) were causing people to leave the presence of

Christ. This was contrary to the teaching the saints had learned. The fact is, there are always things being said and done in the church life that can take us away from the presence of Christ, and these things often come from different teachings. The purpose of healthy teaching is to bring us to Christ Himself. However, though a teaching may be healthy, pure, and profitable for people to gain Christ, if we have impure motives, we will abandon Christ for the sake of the teaching.

The situation among the churches in Paul's time was challenging. It was not the Gentiles who caused him the most suffering, nor the unbelieving Jews, but the Jewish believers! They insisted on their legalistic teaching, which was not in harmony with Paul's teaching. This is evident from the book of James, possibly the earliest written epistle in the New Testament. God's salvation can clearly be seen in this epistle, but there are also many elements of the Law of Moses.

James, the brother of Jesus, and his teaching represented all the Jews who loved and believed in the Lord in Jerusalem. James was very influential and had great authority among the believing Jews. However, his teaching contradicted Paul's, especially concerning the keeping of the Law. Consider his boasting to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law" (Acts 21:20). The revelation of Paul in his epistles constitutes the major part of the foundation of the Christian faith. On the contrary, the teaching of James and those who came from him negatively affected many churches in Judea and among the Gentiles (see Gal. 2:11–14). Such an effect was so great that eventually even the churches Paul had raised up in the province of Asia chose to reject him (2 Tim. 1:15).

We all need to hear Paul's warning. As long as there is a church life, there will be things that can cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching we have learned. In fact, the richer the church life is, the more likely this will be. Those who bring such things cause divisions, make brothers fight

against brothers, and do many things that cause believers to stumble and lose their love and purity in following the Lord.

These contrary teachings may be concerning Christ, yet in practice, those who teach them bring their hearers into many things apart from Christ. Paul was disgusted by such acts. When servants of the Lord add something to their teaching that is not of Christ, they are no longer healthy slaves of the Lord (Rom. 16:18).

Paul said to the church in Corinth, “I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin” (2 Cor. 11:2). Paul felt that believers should have a pure heart toward the Lord. Believers should want, hope in, follow, and love the Lord alone. Believers should desire to gain only the Lord. All other things are not important. The only thing worthy of desiring is the Lord Jesus Christ and Him alone.

Romans 16:18 speaks of those who serve their own appetites and deceive hearts by smooth words and flattering speech. This means that there were unhealthy conversations in the church life. Such talking may not have seemed evil, but rather for the benefit of the saints. However, spiritual people will recognize the flattering words that cause trouble in the church life. We must pursue, love, and follow only the Lord! He is our only goal. Therefore, we must avoid those who serve their own interests.

On the one hand, Paul joyfully greeted the saints in Rome. There were all kinds of saints there, including those who received others, those who labored for and served others, those who were imprisoned with Paul, those who were willing to die for him, and those who bore the testimony of the Lord together. On the other hand, Paul reminds them that they should avoid people who cause dissensions and stumbling, and who are contrary to the teaching they had learned. Paul did not say, “Cast them away!” There is nothing violent in his tone. He instead urges the believers simply to avoid such ones.

The logic in the Bible is often different from our own. Paul did not call anyone unbelievers here. The brothers who were

causing trouble were redeemed by the Lord, and may even have been honorable and lovely. Paul's exhortation, however, was to keep an eye on them and to avoid them.

Dealing with Good and Evil

Finally, Paul adds a word about good and evil in Romans 16:19. What does it mean to be wise in what is good? It means to have the ability to understand, absorb, obtain, and apply the things of God. What does it mean to be innocent concerning evil? It means to be unmixed with anything evil. To be innocent concerning evil indicates purity from evil.

Suppose a brother says, "It is unbelievable! I saw a brother beating up some people!" When we hear this, we should be innocent concerning evil. We should not ask questions, though many may rise up in us, like, "Is it true? How did he beat the others up? Was anyone seriously hurt? Did the police come?" These questions do not need to be asked. When we face evil, we should preserve ourselves by not becoming involved in it. We should be simple concerning anything evil.

We should learn to be such people—wise in what is good, innocent in what is evil. We must understand that people have times of weakness and times of strength. They have times of stumbling and times of standing. When we consider others, we often see the small points in time. When God considers them, He is able to see their whole life. A brother may have truly beaten up others, yet by such failing, he may know himself better, causing him to love the Lord more. We do not know these things, but God is able to see all things.

The God of Peace

Paul calls our God the "God of peace" (Rom. 16:20). Our God is full of peace toward us. Yet, toward Satan, He is not

the God of peace. Our God of peace will crush Satan, yet this crushing is under our feet! God accomplishes this through our healthy practice of the church life and the practical manifestation of the body of Christ among the churches.

A Picture of a Healthy Church Life

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; ²that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well. ³Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; ⁵also greet the church that is in their house. Greet Epäenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. ⁶Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. ⁷Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me. ⁸Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys my beloved. ¹⁰Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus. ¹¹Greet Herodion, my kinsman. Greet those of the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord. ¹²Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine....

¹⁷Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them....

²²I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord.

²³Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother.

²⁴The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

—Romans 16:1–13, 17, 22–24

WORD STUDY

In Romans 16:2, Paul encourages the believers in Rome to help Phoebe in whatever she may have need of them. The Greek word used here for “help,” *paristēmi*, means “to stand beside, to be at hand or ready” (Strong, #3936). Paul continues, “for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well” (v. 2). The Greek word used here for “helper,” *prostatis*, means “a woman set over others; a female guardian, protectress, patroness, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources” (Thayer, 549).

Paul’s presentation of the faithful saints in this chapter, according to Martin Luther, was for us to see and imitate them (Luther, 221).

In verse 17, Paul urges the brothers and sisters to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances, and to turn away from them. The Greek word used here for the phrase “keep your eye on,” *skopeō*, means “to take heed, to look at, or to mark” (Strong, #4648) and implies observing and scrutinizing (Rogers, 345).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

The gospel not only produces mature servants of the Lord but also a well-constituted and healthy church life. Paul’s greeting of the various saints in Romans 16 gives us a picture of the necessary constituents of a healthy church life.

Receiving the Apostles

Romans 16 shows that a healthy church must be able to accept the help and fellowship of apostles. Regarding the practice of the church life, Watchman Nee often asked, “Who are our apostles?” A church that does not accept the help of apostles can never be healthy. After serving in the church for a long time, we will gradually understand that a church’s health is absolutely related to its capacity to accept the help, authority, and spiritual supply of apostles. The saints in Rome had this characteristic. They accepted not only the words spoken by the apostle Paul, but also his help and fellowship.

Receiving One Another

A healthy church also has the ability to receive believers “in a manner worthy of the saints” (Rom. 16:2). Receiving the saints is not easy and has much to do with our spiritual judgment and purity of heart. How should we receive a servant of the Lord? How should we receive a wealthy saint? How should we receive a poor saint? The way we handle all these situations will prove whether we have the ability to receive the saints in a worthy manner.

Sometimes we create issues when saints visit from out of town. Some may be put in a room with a bed and a good mattress, while others may be put in a room with nothing but some blankets on the floor. On the one hand, the receiving saints should recognize that some saints require better conditions based on their needs. On the other hand, those who are being received should also learn to be content with what the Lord has measured to them. Receiving the saints is not an easy thing, nor is it easy to be received. Both experiences require learning.

Helpers and Assistants

Phoebe had been a helper of many people, and even of Paul himself (Rom. 16:2). A healthy church will have some sisters who can help the apostles and the saints. Sisters must learn to become helpers in the church life. If a church has such sisters who can help the apostles and the saints, it will be truly blessed.

We often help out of a sense of duty and so bring on unnecessary pressure. For example, some sisters will politely agree to bring some food to a church lunch on Sunday. However, the pressure to prepare a dish and to clean up afterward weighs heavily on them. Such “help” will not be able to be carried on for long. We must realize that the purpose of help is to warm others’ hearts. A healthy church life needs many sisters who open their homes to help the apostles and the saints in order to produce a sweet and warm feeling. If the sisters are willing to practice this, the whole church can be revived.

Phoebe was very good at helping others, so Paul hoped the saints in Rome would help her. In the church, there should not only be those who help the apostles and saints but also those who assist such helpers. Both of these are blessings to the church. A healthy church life should have many helpers and many who assist these helpers.

Those with the Heart of a Martyr

A healthy church will also have those who have the heart of a martyr, those who are willing to lay down their lives both for the Lord and for the servants of the Lord. Saints like Prisca and Aquila will sacrifice everything for the servants of the Lord and for the testimony of the Lord, even to the point of risking their own necks (Rom. 16:4). Andronicus and Junias were fellow prisoners of Paul (v. 7). Their imprisonment

showed their willingness to lay down their lives for the Lord. Such saints are necessary for a healthy church.

Laborers and Fruit

A healthy church not only has those who work, or labor, but also those who are fruit of such labor. Generally, it is the sisters who labor, yet it is the brothers who are the fruit. Paul mentions work three times in Romans 16: “worked hard” (v. 6), “workers in the Lord” (v. 12), and “worked hard in the Lord” (v. 12). In all three cases, this work is being done by sisters. However, when fruit is mentioned in verse 5, it is referring to a brother: “Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia.” The Greek word used here for “first convert,” *aparchē*, literally means “first fruits” (Strong, #536). Epaenetus is a man’s name, and he must have been the first believer in Asia. This indicates that although the sisters labor, the brothers are the fruit.

Brothers eventually have to rely on the labor of sisters for fruit to be borne. When sisters in the church life begin to labor, brothers not only become fruit but also eventually bear fruit. In my experience, if there are laboring sisters in the church, the brothers who are their fruit will become manifested, and it will be easy for such brothers to minister. If the sisters in the church are unhealthy, overly critical, and judgmental, it is hard for the brothers to lead the church in a fruitful way. A healthy church that has brothers as fruit also has sisters who labor hard.

Apostles

A healthy church will also have apostles, even outstanding apostles, such as Andronicus and Junias (Rom. 16:7). First Corinthians says, “God has appointed in the church, first

apostles...” (12:28). It may surprise us that there were other apostles in the church in Rome when Paul wrote to the saints there. These were even outstanding apostles (see chapter 191 for more on Andronicus and Junias).

God greatly desires that every church produce apostles, and that through the work of these apostles, many churches would be raised up in surrounding cities. God even expects that a church’s prosperity would be shared among many churches in a healthy corporate church life.

We should aspire to fulfill the ministry of apostleship, desiring to go to new cities to preach the gospel. We should earnestly desire to contact people, gain them, gain households, and raise up churches! Then, it is the responsibility of older saints to function as those who had “charge of the gates of the house of the Lord” (1 Chron. 9:23). They should train, cultivate, help, and supply the saints so that brothers can be raised up to become apostles and develop the work of the Lord. What a glorious church life this is!

Fellow Workers

A healthy church will also have some who are fellow workers, both of the servants of the Lord and Christ Himself (Rom. 16:3, 9). For example, there was a situation once where brothers and sisters did not have much positive response toward an older brother who cared for and served them. Then, in a church meeting, a young brother suddenly stood up and told the older brother, “Please tell us what is best for us to do. Whatever you say, we will follow. We are willing to be fellow workers of the Lord, and we are also willing to cooperate with the commitment you have received from the Lord.” This brother who spoke out understood how to labor with an apostle and become his fellow worker.

How do we become fellow workers of apostles? In order to be such fellow workers, we cannot base our actions on

subjective feelings, and we must be wise before the Lord. If we learn to be one with the apostles who have received a burden from the Lord and if we can stand with them, we become their fellow workers.

Those Who Are Approved in Christ

A healthy church will also have some experienced saints who are approved in Christ, such as Apelles (Rom. 16:10). This approval involves passing through trials. Such approval does not come simply from pursuing Christ, which can be done in any environment or situation. True spirituality comes only from pursuing Him as we pass through tribulation.

We should not forsake the Lord in a hard environment. In such an environment, we should not lay aside what is profitable to Christ and put the church life in a secondary place. No matter how many trials we go through, no matter how hard our environments are, no matter how much distress we experience, and no matter how much persecution we face, we should always hold fast to the Lord in order to grow in a proper and healthy way. This growth will make us approved in Christ.

We do not have to ask the Lord for trials. It would be incredibly foolish to pray, “Lord, please allow my house to burn down.” Instead, we should pray, “Lord, I wish to entrust my whole life into Your hands. I do not ask for trials, but when I am going through trials, please keep and preserve me for Yourself.”

Brothers Who Live Together

A healthy church will also have some brothers who live together. Romans 16:10–11 mentions the households of different brothers. When brothers are willing to live

together, some people can be saved, love the Lord, and rise up to follow Him.

Sisters Who Care for the Lord's Servants

In Romans 16:13, Paul greets the mother of Rufus, who was like a mother to him as well. This indicates that a healthy church will also have some sisters who can take care of the Lord's servants like mothers. The servants of the Lord need to be taken care of. The more a servant is used by the Lord and the richer his ministry is, the more care he will need. A spiritual servant like Paul surely needed some sisters to care for him like a mother.

Experienced Brothers for Discerning

In Romans 16:17, Paul warns the saints in Rome to keep an eye on certain people and to avoid them. This indicates that a healthy church needs some brothers who hold fast to the teaching that was learned and who are able to discern unhealthy motives in the saints. Experienced brothers are needed to discern those causing dissensions not according to the learned teaching and hindering and stumbling others.

Those Having the Same Heart as the Apostles

In Romans 16:22, a brother is mentioned who had the same heart as Paul: "I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord." Tertius was not in the church in Rome, but his example still shows us the principle that a healthy church needs those who have the same heart as the apostles and who work with them for the benefit of the saints.

Those with a Large Capacity

In Romans 16:23, Paul says, “Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer greets you.” As the treasurer of the city, Erastus must have been a rich and honorable person, and Gaius must have been quite wealthy to be able to host the whole church in his house. This indicates that a healthy church has some whose capacity is quite large, and who care for and host the apostles and even the whole church.

A Sweet Church Life

Romans 16 shows that a healthy church is constituted with all kinds of people. The church is not just for the rich, nor is it just for the poor. It is for all people. Everyone can find a home in the church, whether rich, poor, noble, common, educated, uneducated, able, or unable. This makes the church life very sweet. If we can have such an appreciative view of the church life, we will be able to receive the unlimited blessings of the Lord in the church.

Paul's Gospel

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, ²⁶but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith.

—Romans 16:25–26

WORD STUDY

In Romans 16:25, Paul uses the Greek phrase *euangelion mou*, which is translated “my gospel.” *Mou*, a form of the Greek word *egō*, is a personal pronoun. Here in verse 25, it is written in the genitive case. This does not mean that Paul was the source of the gospel, but rather that the gospel was possessed by him (Wallace, 737–738). In other words, he had fully obtained it. The phrase “the preaching of Jesus Christ” shows that the gospel is nothing other than the proclamation of Jesus Christ (Luther, 223).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

My Gospel

In Romans 16:25, Paul uses the phrase “my gospel.” Was Paul’s gospel different than the gospel of God mentioned in Romans 1? We have to say “no.” Rather, Paul’s gospel was the same as the gospel of God; the gospel of God became his gospel. The gospel of God was a reality in him, and his gospel was the realization of God’s gospel. The gospel he preached was not only doctrine but also his experience. When he talked about justification, it was the gospel he had experienced. Similarly, when he talked about sanctification, transformation, and glorification, it was the gospel he had experienced. Paul could truly say, “The gospel of God is also my gospel.”

For a person who loves the Lord, no word in the Bible is more encouraging than this phrase, “my gospel.” What is our hope once we begin to love and follow the Lord? Do we expect to be famous? Do we expect to have power and authority? No. Our hope is much more meaningful than this. Our hope is that the gospel of God would become our gospel.

We should tell the Lord, “If You use me, I worship You. If You do not use me, I still worship You. If I become Your great servant, I am joyful. If I am seemingly laid aside and not manifested, I am still joyful. My only hope is that the gospel of God that I have heard, that I have spoken, and that I have pursued may become reality in me. I hope that what I say and what I testify is my person, that the truth I speak is my experience, and that the revelation I proclaim has become Your constitution in me. Lord, I only desire that the gospel of God would be constituted in me and become my gospel.”

What a glory it is for the gospel of God to become “my gospel”! We should tell the Lord that this is our aspiration. We should pray that every message we have heard would become our reality, that every word the Lord speaks to us would

become our constitution, and that every time we preach the gospel, He would be manifested from us and be testified by us. Our hope and desire should be that the revelation, light, and riches we have received would become part of our very being, our very constitution. With such a constitution, we can be a proper and healthy duplication of Christ, ready to manifest Him.

Oh, that many saints in the church would experience the gospel of God becoming “my gospel”! This process includes tears, joys, frustrations, and enjoyments, yet all of these experiences are only for the purpose of constituting us with the gospel of God. When the gospel is ours, when it is totally our constitution, we will not only believe God but also become Christ’s duplication. The phrase “my gospel” shows that we will not only be united with God and mingled with Him, but also incorporated with Him, allowing Him to constitute us with everything He is and has done!

The Preaching of Jesus Christ

Romans 16:25 says, “According to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ.” The gospel that became Paul’s is simply the preaching of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, the gospel of God should become constituted in us and become ours. On the other hand, we must also consider the content of this gospel. What we say, what we teach, and the help we offer the saints should be nothing but the preaching of Jesus Christ.

Such simplicity is the hardest lesson to learn for anyone who loves the Lord, follows Him, has a desire to serve Him, and has a manifested gift. We quickly exalt ourselves as soon as the Lord blesses our proper functioning even the smallest amount. We tend to focus on how or in what way we are manifested. Yet, Paul’s view was simple: “My gospel” is only the preaching of Jesus Christ.

The Revelation of the Mystery of God

Romans 16:25 continues, “According to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past.” Paul’s gospel was according to a revelation—the revelation of the mystery that had been kept secret by God for long ages past. Some translations even say, “Since the world began.” The revelation of this mystery indicates how deep the gospel is. However, many people preach the gospel in a shallow way. They say, “The Lord Jesus is your Savior. He died and rose for you so that you do not have to go to hell. Just accept Him as your Lord!” Paul’s gospel was different. He preached the gospel according to the revelation of the mystery that had been kept secret for long ages past.

There are two main aspects of this mystery: the first is Christ, the second is the church. Christ is the mystery of God (Col. 2:2), and the church is the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4–6). Therefore, the great mystery Paul spoke of was Christ and the church (5:32).

God kept this mystery secret through all the ages. He created Adam, commanded Noah, called Abraham, and commissioned Moses all because He had a mystery. God’s mystery is not according to man’s understanding. Why was Adam created with dust? No one knows. Why was Noah’s ark made with gopher wood? How was Abraham called by God? Why did God raise up Moses? Without the revelation of God’s mystery, no one knows the answers to these questions because mankind can only understand the letters and words in front of them. Without the revelation given to Paul, no one could have understood the content of God’s mystery. Through Paul’s epistles, we are able to understand that the gospel of God is not only for people’s salvation from hell, but also for the sons of God to be glorified with God in Christ (Rom. 8:30)!

Throughout chapter 16, Paul’s human virtues and care for the church shine through to us. By the end of the chapter

(vv. 25–26), we can also see that he was a mature servant of God. The gospel of God was his gospel, and his gospel was the preaching of Jesus Christ, revealing to us the mystery God had kept secret for generations.

We will thank Paul when we see him one day. If he had not written his epistles, our knowledge of God, His work, and the desire that is in His heart would have been limited. It is by the revelation Paul received, and then revealed to us, that we can understand the mystery that had been kept secret for long ages past.

The Establishing of the Saints

Romans 16:25 says, “Now to Him who is able to establish you...according to my gospel...according to the revelation of the mystery.” The mystery God had kept hidden was finally revealed for a purpose—to establish the saints. Paul continually revealed divine and mystical things to the believers, including God’s economy and heart’s desire. But this was not for his own glory. When God’s mystery was revealed, the saints were established.

The Faith of the Nations

Romans 16:26 says, “[The mystery] now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith.” This mystery was revealed through Paul, yet according to the commandment of God, it was made known to all the nations by the prophetic Scriptures. Therefore, Paul could not take any credit. On the one hand, no one’s revelation is higher than Paul’s. On the other hand, Paul claimed no credit for himself. His ability to write such a statement shows how broad and great his heart was.

The manifestation of the mystery is for leading the nations to be obedient to faith. The gospel of God constituted Paul in such a way that it became his gospel, and this gospel both was and is the preaching of Jesus Christ. This preaching is according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret, it establishes the saints, it has been made known according to the commandment of the eternal God and by the prophetic Scriptures, and it ultimately leads the nations to be obedient to faith. In other words, the faith of the nations is the final goal of the preaching of Jesus Christ.

Paul's testimony here is extremely sweet. He could boldly declare that the gospel of God was his gospel. May we too come to call the gospel of God "my gospel"!

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Glory to the Only Wise God

*To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever.
Amen.*

—Romans 16:27

WORD STUDY

The Greek word used in Romans 16:27 for “wise,” *sophos*, means “skilled, expert...forming the best plans and using the best means for their execution” (Thayer, 582).

G. Campbell Morgan described the closing praise of this epistle to the Romans: “The final word of the great letter of salvation is fittingly one of praise. The apostle reverently ascribed the glory to Him, to Whom it is thus evidently due” (Morgan, 244).

REVELATION AND APPLICATION

Here, at the close of Romans, Paul offers praise. Our God is very special to Paul. First, He is “the only.” He is the unique God. There is no other beside our unique God who can do such wonderful things for our full salvation, both individually and corporately in the church life. Second, God is wise.

His love, His power, and everything He does are all according to His wisdom. Praise the Lord!

We should allow the Lord Jesus to grow in us and be constituted in us so that we can give glory to the unique and wise God. We should praise the Lord, saying, "Lord! We praise You for the many blessings You have given to Your church under Your wise arrangement and sovereignty! You are the unique and wise God! We will give glory to You from now unto eternity! Amen."

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