

# The letter to the **ROMANS**

Former Adventist Fellowship Bible Study

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## 2. Notes on Romans 1:8-17

Paul begins this section of his letter with thanksgiving for the Roman Christians. "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you," he says. The interesting point about this declaration of thanks is that he specifically acknowledges both the Father and the Son but in different ways. He thanks God the Father, but he is careful to note that his thanks go through Jesus Christ.

Before he was crucified, Jesus told his disciples that the Father would give them whatever they asked in his name. (John 15:16) Because they belonged to Jesus and were restored to the Father by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they would be able to ask the Father directly when they had requests. Before Jesus died, the priests represented them to God. They could pray to God, but they could not be in His presence. The priests were the only ones who could enter the temple of God, and the high priest was the only one who could enter the Most Holy Place where the presence of God resided over the ark. The way for people to enter the Holy Place "was not disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was standing." (Hebrews 9:8) After Jesus' death, a "new and living way" was opened for humanity "through the curtain" that was Christ's body. (Hebrews 10:19-22) Jesus' death removed the barrier that separated God from humanity. Through faith in Jesus, people could now directly approach the Father without asking for mediation from a priest.

In the same way, Paul can now praise God the Father directly for the Romans and for all other things for which he's grateful. Because he is in Christ and connected to God by the Holy Spirit, he can praise God through the way opened by Jesus instead of praising God from a distance.

## Teacher and Student

Even though he has never seen them, Paul is eager to meet the Roman believers. He prays for them consistently, and he anticipates not only teaching them but also gaining courage from their faith. He seen himself not as an authority sent to instruct them but as a fellow believer in mutual service with them. He lives by the example Jesus set when he washed his disciples feet as they argued about their respective places in the kingdom.

Paul tells the Romans that he is "obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish." (v.14) Paul's obligation, or indebtedness, stemmed from God's remarkable call to him. When He blinded Paul on the Damascus Road, Jesus told him that he had appointed him as a servant and as a witness of what he had seen of Jesus and also of what Jesus would yet show him. (Acts. 26:16-18) This singular incident interrupted Paul's murderous crusade to kill Christians.

His reputation as a violent and dangerous Jew bent on destroying Christianity was widely known. After Paul's confrontation and conversion, Jesus spoke to a believing Jew named Ananias and confirmed his call of the dangerous Paul. Jesus asked Ananias to go to Paul and to pray for his healing. "This man is my chosen instrument" he said, chosen to preach both to the Gentiles and also to the Jews. (Acts. 9:15)

Paul realized that he had passed from death to life. His sinful anger and desire to control the movement of God had been replaced by humility and a deep willingness to preach the gospel, to proclaim the very message he had tried to kill. His

gratitude included a total commitment to do the work Jesus had appointed him to do. Because he now had eternal security in Jesus, his debt to Jesus included obedience to his call to preach; his calling obligated him both to the Gentiles and the Jews.

## Not Ashamed

“I am not ashamed of the gospel,” Paul wrote, “because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” (v. 16)

Paul is declaring his loyalty to Jesus and to his calling. He is using strong words to describe his commitment: he is obligated, and he is not ashamed. The call to be a bearer of the gospel is not a mere career choice which one may abandon if one becomes weary of it. When God calls a person to do his work, that is a sacred appointment which will yield deep contentment as well as costly demands.

The idea of shame in connection with serving Jesus is a common New Testament theme which was foretold as early as Isaiah. In chapter 51 God promises eternal salvation for His people. In chapter 7 he says, “Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults.” This is a new covenant prophecy; those who have God’s law in their hearts are those who are freed from the law written on stone and renewed by the indwelling Holy Spirit. God clearly foretold that those who live by the Spirit instead of by works would be misunderstood and insulted.

Jesus also taught that those who bear his name would suffer. He said they would be blessed when people insulted them, persecuted them, and said all kinds of evil about them because of their unwavering commitment to Him. (Matthew 5:11-12) “No servant is greater than his master,” he told his disciples. If they persecuted me, they’ll persecute you because of my name. (John 15:20-21) In his second epistle to Timothy, Paul encouraged him not to be ashamed to testify about the Lord. (2 Timothy 1:8, 12, 16)

The natural state of humanity is spiritual death. Unregenerate people who are not seeking truth are threatened by the freedom and authority of those who live by the Spirit. True Christ-followers are not controlled by politics or manipulated by ego. They answer to one authority, the Lord Jesus, and the nonnegotiable integrity and wisdom that results from that loyalty threatens and angers those who live for themselves. Christ-followers can expect persecution and misunderstanding from the unregenerate world as well as from “carnal Christians” who claim the name of Jesus but do not live by the Spirit’s power.

Paul acknowledges this reality in his life in the opening passages of his epistle to a church he has never visited. He longs to see them and share encouragement with them; because of his miraculous rescue from death by the Lord Jesus, he is obligated to serve them and anyone else God sends to him. And in spite of what some may consider his presumptuous eagerness to preach the gospel wherever he is, he declares that he is not ashamed. The gospel is the power of God to save humanity

from eternal death, and he is proud and privileged to proclaim it no matter how foolish some may consider him to be. Although he may be ridiculed and tormented because of the gospel, he will not be ashamed and squelch the Spirit’s power enabling him to preach.

## Jews First

In his declaration of confidence in the gospel, Paul states that it is for the salvation of all believers, “first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” This somewhat enigmatic statement is based upon hundreds of years of history. God formed the Jewish nation for the purpose of revealing his plans for salvation to the world. Jesus referred to this historical fact when he spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well. You Samaritans, he said in essence, worship what you don’t know; we worship what we do know, “for salvation is from the Jews.” (John 4:22)

Isaiah prophesied the ultimate outcome of Jerusalem. In chapter 2 he describes the “last days” and the establishment of “the mountain of the Lord’s temple” as chief among the nations.” (v. 1) “The law will go out from Zion,” recorded, “the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (v. 2) God’s communication of his will and of his justice and mercy have been revealed through the Jews: through their laws, their prophets, and their rituals.

Paul enlarges on the fact of the Jews’ heritage in Romans 3:1-2. “What advantage is there in being a Jew?” he asks. Then he answers his own question: “Much in every way.” First of all, he says, “they have been entrusted with the very words of God.” He expands on this trust in Romans 9:3-5. “Theirs is the adoption as sons,” he says. Further, theirs is the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs also are the patriarchs; from them is traced the ancestry of Christ who is God over all.

All of God’s specific revelation of himself and of his plans for his people had been given to the Jews. God established the Jewish nation in order to reveal himself to a world which had become twisted by its inherent sin. Without a written law or any special revelation of God’s will, people knew God only by the revelation of his power shown through creation. This revelation, however, was limited. God called Abraham and established Israel as a venue to show the world the truth about himself. He began to teach the world about his care for his people and his longing for them through his relationship with Israel.

In Romans 15:8-9 Paul further explains that Jesus became a servant to the Jews on behalf of God’s truth to confirm the promises God made to the patriarchs. When Jesus came, many of the Old Testament prophecies finally made sense. Jews with eyes to see and ears to hear finally understood who Jesus was when they saw how his life fulfilled—often in surprising ways—the prophecies about him.

Shortly after Pentecost Peter spoke to the Jews assembled at the temple in Jerusalem for the time of prayer. “You are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers,” he said to them. (Acts 3:25) He continued by pointing out that

when God “raised up his servant” who had been promised to Israel, “he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.” (v. 26) Israel knew a redeemer was coming. He had been the focus of God’s promises ever since he first made a covenant with Abraham. He came to his own people first; they were, after all, the ones who should have recognized and welcomed him, for they held and taught the laws and promises that pointed to him.

In Pisidian Antioch Paul and Barnabas also told the Jews they had to speak the word of God to them first. Since they rejected it, however, Paul and Barnabas were turning to the Gentiles as per God’s command. (see Acts 13:46-47)

God revealed himself to the Jews not because they were superior to the Gentiles in any way. Rather, God historic relationship with Israel was entirely because of his sovereign choice. Israel did nothing to earn God’s revelation and interaction with them. God called Abraham and sovereignly promised him seed, land, and a blessing, and Israel was the nation that developed from his miracle son Isaac. God shaped and blessed Israel not only because he was going to reveal his love and will for mankind through them, but also because he would bring the world his promised Savior through them. Salvation was first for the Jews because they were the people God had set apart to receive and share his promises and blessings. It was first for them because Jesus came through them. God’s people have always been his because he chose them and made them his own, not because they did anything to merit his choice.

## Gentiles Second

The death and resurrection of Jesus inaugurated a new epoch. The chasm of sin had been repaired, and a “new and living way” was opened by which all people could reach the Father. Through belief in Jesus, all humanity, whether Jew or Gentile, could become intimate with God. No longer did a person have to become a Jew in order to become one of God’s people.

Paul uses the image of a grape vine to explain the Gentiles’ position in the kingdom. He calls them wild branches which were grafted into the vine after some of the natural branches were broken off. Salvation has come to the Gentiles, Paul says, “to make Israel envious”. He warns the Gentiles not to become arrogant, boasting that natural branches were broken off so they could get in.

“Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God; sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again...Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.” (Romans 11:22-23, 30-32)

Israel’s general apostasy and rejection of the Lord Jesus opened salvation to the Gentiles. No longer does a Gentile have to become a Jew in order to receive salvation. In the time of Israel, Gentiles could become part of God’s people by being circumcised and becoming Jewish. Only then could they eat the Passover feast and worship with the Jews. In the new covenant, however, a person may become a Christian directly by accepting Jesus. The issue of becoming Jewish before becoming Christian was the heresy of the Judaizers against which Paul railed. No Gentile needs to observe the Jewish laws or rituals in order to belong to God. Salvation is no longer through the Jews. While it came first to the Jews, it is no longer the avenue by which people may enter God’s family. It is a perversion of the gospel to insist that Christians embrace the Ten Commandments and other old covenant observances in addition to embracing Jesus. In Christ the Ten Commandments are fulfilled; in Christ people experience the righteousness that is by faith.

In Christ there is no difference between the Jews and the Gentiles. All who believe are made righteous by the blood of Jesus and by faith in Him. All have sinned; all are born dead. All are “justified freely by his grace” through Jesus’ redemption of humanity. They have all received “a righteousness that is by faith” apart from the law. This righteousness is Christ’s righteousness covering us when we believe in him. His victory and perfection are ours when we are hidden in him.

## Commitment

God is calling you to take the risk of living by faith. He is asking you to give up your control and your “right” to your life and surrender yourself and your circumstances to him. He is asking you to trust him and to accept his righteousness that is by faith in Jesus.

The life of a Christ-follower is not passive. It is a life of active surrender, of risking shame and persecution to defend the gospel, of taking responsibility for your actions and decisions instead of avoiding reality. Following Jesus means being willing to feel pain and joy, to see as Jesus sees and to love as He loves. Being a Christ-follower is a calling to walk courageously in the light. It means being willing to embrace the truth regardless of the cost.

Let God reveal the things in your life that you need to surrender to him. Accept Jesus’ sacrifice for you, and let his blood cleanse your sins and his resurrection heal your wounds and give you new life. Allow the Holy Spirit to change your heart and make you one with Jesus.

Praise the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the gospel of God which “is the power of salvation for everyone who believes.”