

Notes on Romans 1

This is a primarily a synopsis, but with occasionally extensive modifications and additions, of the relevant section of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections: New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

I. God has unveiled his righteousness in faithfulness to Abraham 1.1–4.25

The main subjects of Romans are laid out in the first four chapters. After some preliminary material, the introduction (1.1-17) offers a dense statement of his main theme:

In the good news of the risen Jesus, Messiah and Lord, the one true God has unveiled his covenant faithfulness and justice for the benefit of all who believe.

Paul then launches into a description of the world that has worshipped other gods and has reaped a harvest of dehumanization, moral deterioration, and condemnation (1.18–3.20). The spearhead of this attack (1.18–2.16) follows the regular Jewish polemic against paganism, but Paul sharpens it up with specifically Christian notes, and hints that Israel itself is included in the general indictment. After showing in 2.1-16 that God's impartial judgment leaves no room for moral superiority, he turns in 2.17-29 specifically to his own people, the Jews, the people chosen by God to bring light to the world, whose own prophets indicate that they've failed in this vocation and are in danger of relinquishing their special status. It's very important to recognize that this is an insider critique, based on Israel's own prophetic tradition, and not the railing of an antisemitic outsider, as some have mistakenly assumed.

This raises acutely the questions, What is the point of being part of God's chosen people in the first place? How is God righteous in the whole sequence of events? (3.1-9). Putting off these questions for the moment with very brief answers, Paul stresses both Israel's faithlessness and God's abiding faithfulness, placing the issue beyond doubt with a list of biblical passages (3.10-18) that all point one way: The Jews have joined the Gentiles

in the dock, with nothing to say in their defense. All are equally guilty before the impartial judge.

This conclusion poses a classic question within the world of Second Temple Judaism. When God's faithfulness conflicts with the demands of his impartial justice—when the double meaning of God's 'righteousness' or 'justice' contradicts itself—what then? Paul's answer is emphatic (3.21–4.25): In Jesus the Messiah, God has been true to his covenant with Abraham and to the demands of justice. As a result, there is now a Jew-plus-Gentile people of God, Abraham's true children, marked out by faith rather than works of Torah.

All this has come about 'through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah' (3.22). Jesus has accomplished—to put it another way, God has accomplished through Jesus—what Israel failed to accomplish. God's own covenant faithfulness is thus unveiled at last, an event to which the law and prophets pointed but that they could not bring about. The Messiah's 'faithfulness', the subject of the good news itself, consists in his death, as the culmination of his whole 'obedience', and in the resurrection by which God vindicated his faithfulness. The faithful obedience (or obedient faithfulness) of Jesus the Messiah was God's means of dealing with sin and hence of creating a forgiven people. The sign of membership in God's renewed people is faith, not Torah works, which would have restricted membership to Jews and would in any case have condemned everyone, even the Jews themselves (since all alike are sinful). However, since the good news of Jesus thus creates a single family for the one God of Jews and Gentiles alike, the Torah itself, in which confession of this one God is central, is strangely fulfilled.

All this has come about in fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham (4.1-25). Abraham is the father, not just of

Jews, but of all who believe. In a lengthy exposition of Genesis 15 (the chapter in which God made the initial covenant with Abraham), Paul demonstrates that the promises to the patriarch were not conditioned by works (4.2-8), by circumcision (4.9-12), or by Torah (4.13-15). God has now created, through faith, the single family he promised in the first place (4.16-17), consisting of believing Jews and believing Gentiles. In a closing peroration (4.18-25), Paul echoes his indictment of pagan humanity in 1.18-32 and shows by implication how the problem has been undone. Abraham's faith is the characteristic mark of genuine, God-honoring humanity. This new family, called into being by the good news, is marked out by faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead (4.23-25; for Paul's view that the good news was already, in a sense, preached to Abraham himself, see Ga 3.8).

Paul has constructed this argument in such a way as to prepare carefully for the points he wishes to address in Rm 9–11 and 12–16. To develop these lines of thought, however, and to address the questions connected with them, he needs to lay still deeper foundations, which he will do in Rm 5–8.

A. God's righteousness is unveiled in the Messiah 1.1-17

Paul introduces himself in terms of his vocation and defines that vocation in terms of the good news, moving from himself to the good news, back to himself and his ministry, and out into the world that includes the Roman Christians. As is his usual practice with the opening formalities, he introduces the themes that will occupy him in the rest of the letter.

1. Paul, slave and ambassador of the Messiah 1.1a

Paul announces himself with the word that, above all others in his world, carried overtones of social degradation. Slaves had no rights, no property, and no prospects; they were just there to do what they were told. Changing *doulos* to mean 'servant', as though Paul were a free man who had a job in the personal service industry misses the point. Paul claims no social standing in his approach to the imperial capital.

BUT—his master is the King before whom all other kings will quail: 'King Jesus'. By transliterating *Christos* rather than translating it, most English versions of Paul have encouraged the view that 'Christ' was just a proper name as far as Paul was concerned. But Paul is very careful about his use of *christos*, 'Jesus', and 'Lord'. These words are not just synonyms, or interchangeable. And the overtones of *christos*— which we will henceforth back-translate as 'Messiah'— are clearly royal. For the Messiah

is the anointed king of Israel whom Scripture designated as the ruler of all other earthly monarchs (see, eg, Ps 72.8-11; 89.27; Isa 11.1-4). Paul is the slave announcing the King. This is the message he calls 'good news', and his language is very definitely counter-imperial at almost every turn.

Paul's two further self-designations, building on the slave-of-the-king status, are both significant for this letter. First, he is 'called [to be] an apostle'. 'Call' is how Paul usually refers not to the vocation that a Christian may have, but to the moment when the good news message of Jesus first makes its saving impact on him or her. Ga 1.15-16 shows that in Paul, the two ideas run together: Paul's 'conversion' was also his 'vocation' to be apostle to the nations. In 1Co 9.1, Paul seems to define 'apostle' in terms of those who had actually seen the risen Jesus, alluding not least to his own moment of seeing Jesus on the Damascus road. For him, conversion and calling were both contained in the one event.

2. God's good news 1.1b-4

a. Long ago promised in Israel's prophetic writings 1.1b-2

In parallel with this vocation, Paul has been 'set apart', marked off from others. 'Set apart' (*aphorizō*) indicates intention, in this case, God's: God has set this slave apart from others and put him on one task in particular— the service of the 'good news'. 'Set apart' may also reflect, with wry irony, the self-description of a Pharisee who had considered himself 'separated' (Pharisee is thought to mean 'separated') from the common herd of ordinary Jews.

'God's good news' is then at the heart of Paul's self-definition and self-understanding. In early Christianity, the 'good news' (*euangelion*, also translated 'gospel') referred to the proclamation about Jesus; the books called 'gospels' hadn't been written yet. Paul uses the term to denote the message, or announcement, that he was making around the Mediterranean world, that 'Jesus is Lord' (10.9) (and Caesar isn't). It had two meanings:

- In Paul's Jewish world, 'good news' recalls Isa 40.9 and 52.7, where a messenger brings to Jerusalem the good news of Babylon's defeat, the end of Israel's exile, and the return of Yhwh to Zion.
- In the pagan world Paul addressed, the same Greek word referred to the announcement of the accession or the birthday of a ruler or emperor.

Paul lives and writes at the interface of these two worlds. His message about Jesus was an announcement both of what God 'had promised ahead of time by his prophets

in the holy writings' (1.2), and of a reign that challenged all others.¹

The good news is not, strictly speaking, Paul's, even though he refers to it as 'my good news' in 2.16; it's 'God's good news' (1.1b). As noted in the Introduction, the word 'God' occurs far more times, proportionately, in Romans than in Paul's other writings. This letter is about how, through the lens of the good news, the one true God's covenant plan and purpose have been unveiled before the world. Paul's view of God is deeply Jewish: the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the creator of the world, had now brought history to its climax in Jesus. He is urging the Roman Christians to understand God's purpose, and to find their own place within it, so that they can then live appropriately and support Paul's apostolic task as well. Paul is entrusted with awesome responsibility. He is in charge of distributing royal bounty.

The good news is about 'God's son' (1.3a.). This phrase occurs seldom in Romans, but is nonetheless an important key to Paul's whole way of thinking about Jesus. But we have to be careful. When we say 'Son of God' today, we tend to think of it in the context of the Creed—

'one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father'.

Paul certainly was a trinitarian, as we will see— and indeed he stands at the root of the Creed's language— but he would not have meant 'son of God' in quite this way. The Creed took shape in the context of the great christological controversies of the fourth century and beyond. Paul's context is the Old Testament. In the OT, 'son of God' primarily refers to *Israel*, adopted as God's 'son' explicitly at the time of the Exodus (see Ex 4.22) and looking back to the Exodus, when pleading for deliverance.² The expression also refers to the king, adopted as Yhwh's 'firstborn son' (cf eg Ps 89.26-27)— the seed of David who is also God's son.³ Here, 'son' means something more like 'crown prince', 'vicegerent', and 'official representative', all rolled into one. These two senses (Israel and king) belong together, since the king represents Israel, so that what is true of him is true of the people. To

belong to Israel, in a passage that seems to have become proverbial, is to be 'in David' or 'in the son of Jesse'.⁴

So the natural meaning of the phrase 'God's good news... concerning his son' (1.2-3) is 'God's announcement, in fulfillment of prophecy, of the royal enthronement of the Messiah, Israel's anointed king, as his vicegerent and lord of the world'.

As you can see, there's a huge difference between this and the more familiar way that, for us, 'Son of God' more or less just means that Jesus is divine. We will need to keep this in mind. Paul doesn't imply, though, that Jesus is somehow *not* divine. Quite the contrary— at one point he even says, 'the Messiah, who is over all, God forever blessed. Amen!' (9.5). And at least as early as Ga 4.1-7, Paul uses 'God's son' in a way that is rooted in this Jewish tradition of Israel/kingship, but draws on other Jewish imagery, such as God's sending of Wisdom, to make the point that the 'son' is one sent into the world not only as a *messenger* but also as the personal *expression* of God's love and purpose. We'll see that the arguments in Romans work only if there's a fundamental identity between the God's own very self and his 'son'— even though, of course, the language of father and son at the same time distinguishes them. Paul's language leads to questions to which he provides no answers, but only hints. It would be the work of the later fathers to clarify and to answer those questions.

b. Its content: God's son marked out by the resurrection 1.3-4

The 'son' is then described in a double statement concerning Jesus' human descent, on the one hand, and the meaning of his resurrection, on the other.

This is the careful, weighted, programmatic statement of Paul's subtext throughout the whole epistle.⁵ God's son, declares Paul, was born of the seed of David and marked out as⁶ 'son of God' by the resurrection. Shorn of explanatory (but perhaps, to us, confusing) clauses, and granted what has been said about the meaning of 'God's son' in Jewish tradition, this is a reasonably straightforward two-part statement of Jesus' Messiahship: (1) Jesus was born of David's line;⁷ (2) the resurrection declared to the

¹ See NT Wright, 'Gospel and Theology in Galatians', in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker*, ed. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson, JSNTSup 108 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994) 222-39. Available at ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Gospel_Theology_Galatians.pdf

² See also Jr 31.9; Ho 11.1; 13.13; Mal 1.6.

³ See also 1Sm 7.14 (quoted with this sense in 4Q174 10-13; cf 4Q246 2.1); 1Ch 17.13; Ps 2.7; 89.26-27. The term also occasionally refers to angels (Gn 6.2; Jb 1.6; 2.1; 38.7; Dn 3.25; cf 3.28; Song of Three 26).

⁴ 1Sm 19.43-20.2; cf 1Kg 12.16; 2Ch 10.16.

⁵ See also 9.5; and 15.12, the final scriptural quotation of the main body of the letter.

⁶ 'Declared to be' is not misleading, but the word ὀπίζω (*horizō*) really means 'marked out as'.

⁷ 'Born' is a better translation for γενόμενου (*genomenou*) than 'descended'. Paul says nothing of Jesus' virginal conception and offers no answer to the question that Matthew and Luke seem to be answering, as to how he can be 'God's son' and David's at the same time.

world that he really was the Messiah and had been so all along.⁸ Paul's Christian thinking began with the recognition at his Damascus road experience that the Jesus he had thought to be a false Messiah was after all the true one.⁹

To the first phrase, 'born of David's seed' (1.3), Paul adds 'according to the flesh', intending, of course, to clarify the sense of Jesus' Davidic descent, but also thereby opening a can of worms for the interpreter. In line with the 'creedal' reading we spoke of above, many readers and translations (such as NIV) take the double statement as expressing Jesus' 'humanity' on the one hand, and his 'divinity' on the other. 'According to the flesh' thus refers to his 'human nature'. But 'flesh' (*sarx*) is never just 'human nature' for Paul; nor is it just a reference to body as opposed to soul or spirit. *'Flesh' is always human nature seen as corruptible, decaying, dying, on the one hand, and/or rebelling, deceiving, and sinning, on the other.* 'Flesh' always carries negative overtones somewhere on this scale, whereas for Paul being human was not something negative, but good and God-given and to be reaffirmed in the resurrection.

Some have taken 'according to the flesh' as Paul's way of hinting that, while Jesus was indeed of the seed of David, this was not the most significant thing about him. In other words, he was David's seed according to 'mere flesh', but more importantly, he was God's son. But the whole point of Paul's good news is that Jesus, precisely as *Israel's* Messiah, is now Lord of the *world*. That belief informs and undergirds this letter and indeed all of Paul's labor.

The rest of Romans shows us what Paul means by adding 'according to the flesh' and 'according to the spirit'. Jesus the Messiah is the one in whom God's people find their identity and salvation; he has come where they are in order to rescue them (more fully stated in 8.3-4; cf Ga 4.4-5). His human, 'fleshy' (in Paul's sense) identity is the place where he does for Adamic humanity what Adamic humanity could not do for itself. Rm 1.3 thus looks ahead to 5.12-21 and all the elements of Rm 6-8 that follow from it. It's also evoked by 9.5, which, as we shall see, restates a very similar two-part christology, making it the ground plan of the argument of Rm 9-11: Jesus is

Israel's Messiah according to the flesh and is also (now at last explicitly) 'God over all, forever blessed'.

So although 'according to the flesh' carries negative connotations, Paul is not denying or playing down Jesus' physical Davidic descent and Jewish Messiahship. They are part of God's saving plan. Of course Jesus was very different from the expected Messiah. A crucified Messiah was a failed Messiah. The Messiah was to rebuild or cleanse the Temple, defeat the pagans, rescue Israel and bring God's justice to the world. Anyone who died without accomplishing these things, particularly one who attacked the Temple and died at the hands of the pagans he should have been defeating, leaving Israel unredeemed and the world still unjust, was obviously not the true Messiah. This is why it took something utterly extraordinary to make anyone suppose that Jesus was in fact the Messiah. Paul is clear: the *resurrection* marked Jesus out as 'son of God' (1.4). The resurrection reversed the verdict that anyone would have passed on Jesus at his crucifixion. And if such a Messiah did not fit existing conceptions of what Israel's God was supposed to be doing, too bad! Existing conceptions would just have to be rethought around him. That, indeed, was the intellectual dimension of Paul's lifework.

Jesus was declared to be son of God 'in power'. This phrase seems to refer both to the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead (see 1Co 6.14; 15.24,43; 2Co 13.4; Eph 1.19-20; Ph 3.10) and which thereby declared his identity as Messiah, and to the powerful nature of his sonship, through which he confronts all the powers of the world, up to and including death itself, with the news of a different and more effective type of power altogether. Paul, of course, sees this same power at work now, by the Spirit, through the proclamation of the good news and in the lives of those who are 'in the Messiah' (see, eg, 1.16; 11.23; 15.13; 1Co 1.24; 2.4-5).

Balancing 'according to the flesh' in 1.3, Paul writes, 'according to the spirit of holiness' (1.4). It's just conceivable that Paul intends to mark, by this phrase, the difference between the Spirit by whom Jesus was raised from the dead and the Spirit, now to be known as the Spirit of Jesus, who dwells in the hearts of believers. These are the same, of course, but two different stages of operation. The point is that God raised Jesus from the dead by the power of the Spirit (see 8.11), in line with scriptural promises that attributed the promised new life on the other side of death, and more particularly the new hope for exiled and desolate Israel, to the breath, wind, or Spirit of God (Ez 37.5,9-10,14; Joel 3.1-5).¹⁰ So saying

⁸ No biblical texts explicitly predict the Messiah's resurrection ('resurrection', when it developed as a belief in the post-biblical period, was thought of as happening to all God's people simultaneously), but it's possible that at least some read 2Sm 7.12 ('I will raise up your seed after you'; cf 1Kg 8.20)— a key 'son of God' passage— in this sense, not least because the LXX has 'I will resurrect (ἀναστήσω) your seed after you'.

⁹ Cf Ga 1.16; Ac 9.20,22, where it's clear that 'son of God' and 'Messiah' are virtually interchangeable.

¹⁰ The same Hebrew word (*ruah*) stands for 'breath', 'wind', and 'spirit'; so too with the Greek *pneuma*.

'born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared God's son in power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead' lays a foundation for Paul's coming description of God's rescue, in the Messiah, of the old, fleshly humanity and His constitution, in the Messiah, of the new humanity, 'who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit' (8.4).

The spirit marked out Jesus as son of God 'by the resurrection of the dead'. The word 'dead' is plural in the Greek. For Paul the Jew, the 'resurrection' was something that would happen at the end, when all God's people would be raised to life together. What had happened to Jesus was that this general resurrection had been brought forward into the present, in one particular case. But this case still belonged to and anticipated the total 'resurrection of [all] the dead' (cf 1Co 15.20-22).¹¹ This is important for understanding Paul in general and Romans in particular: Paul saw the event of Pascha (Easter) as the start and foretaste of God's long-promised messianic 'age to come', that he and many other Jews had been expecting. The resurrection told Paul not only who Jesus was (the Messiah), but also what time it was (the start of the messianic age).

Paul's initial summary of the good news is rounded off with Jesus' full title: 'Jesus, Messiah, our Lord':

'Jesus': In Paul, the name 'Jesus' refers to the human being, Jesus of Nazareth, now risen and exalted but still the same human Jesus.

'Messiah': The one in whom Israel's destiny is summed up and brought to proper fulfillment. This word is on its way to being a name (denoting Jesus but no longer connoting Messiahship), but it has not reached that point in Paul.

'Lord': This title expresses both Jesus' exalted (risen) humanity, including his superior position to all other 'lords' in the world, and his sometimes explicit ascription of divinity. This is most clear when Paul quotes passages from the LXX where the word 'Lord' (*kyrios*) stands for 'Yhwh', speaking of Jesus (eg, 10.13).

Saying 'our Lord' doesn't mean Jesus' lordship is over 'us believers' but not over other people; it's just a way of giving explicit allegiance to the lord of the whole world, supreme over all others.

¹¹ NIV reads 'his resurrection', which obscures the point.

So this is Paul's shorthand summary of 'God's good news'. Note that for Paul the 'good news' is *not about how human beings get saved*. It's an announcement about 'Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord'. One recent commentator writes, typically, that 'the gospel cannot be understood without reference to the person of Christ'.¹² In a way, that's true even to the point of tautology, but it implies that the 'gospel' is something other than the proclamation of Jesus as Lord— the 'good news' is not that Jesus is Lord, but that we can be 'saved'. But Paul has not said this. He has said that the good news is 'about [God's] son Jesus the Messiah our Lord' (1.3-4). The epistle is about *God's covenant faithfulness*, not about how we can be 'saved'. True, we are saved by God's covenant faithfulness. But we have to let Paul tell his story his way.

3. Paul's ministry as God's ambassador to the nations 1.5

Having summarized the good news, Paul returns to his introduction. Through this Jesus whom God has marked out as his son in power, Paul has received 'grace and apostleship' (1.5) with a particular purpose: to call the (non-Jewish) 'nations' (*ethnē*)— the 'Gentiles'— into covenant relationship with the one God of Israel so that the name of Jesus might be glorified throughout the world (cf Mal 1.5,14).

He calls this covenant relationship the 'obedience of faith' (1.5). NIV translates this as the 'obedience that comes from faith', but Paul means the 'obedience which consists in faith'. 'Obedience' is a more prominent theme in Romans than elsewhere in the NT (elsewhere in Paul only in 2Co 7.15; 10.5-6; Phm 21). It indicates what Jesus the Messiah did, over against what Adam did (5.19), and is the sphere or realm into which Christians come through baptism (6.12-17). Paul reiterates that the 'obedience of faith' is what he wants to bring about among the nations at the end of the main teaching part of the letter in 15.18 (cf 16.19), as well as in a concluding formula that closely echoes this opening one (16.26).

So God has raised Jesus from the dead and marked him out as his son, and wants all the nations to obey him.

'Obey' in Greek is *hypakouō*, from *akouō*, 'hear'.¹³ This is the word that the LXX¹⁴ uses for *šamaʿ*, whose basic

¹² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 51.

¹³ English 'obedience' likewise is from Latin *ob-audio*.

¹⁴ 'LXX' is the normal abbreviation for the *Septuagint* version of the Old Testament, a translation into Greek made by the Jews of Alexandria, Egypt about 150 years before Christ— according to legend, by seventy (Latin *septuaginta* or *LXX*) scholars. As the existing Greek translation,

meaning is 'hear', but which often means to 'hear' and to follow through as well— to 'obey'. In the key Jewish prayer known from its first word as the *Shemá*—

'Hear, O Israel, Yhwh is our God, Yhwh is one; and you shall love Yhwh your God with all your heart' (Deut 6.4-5)

—it refers to Israel's covenant obligations. To bring the nations into this 'hearing' of 'obedience' is to bring them into the covenant family of the one God. Paul refers explicitly to the *Shemá* prayer at the very point when he is saying that God is the God of the nations as well as of Israel (3.29-30).

Of course, the actual notion of 'obedience'— doing what one is told— is itself important. Generations of theologians have worried whether this emphasis on obedience, so early in a letter supposedly about 'justification by faith alone', doesn't suggest the priority of good moral works rather than pure faith.¹⁵ Such anxiety misses the point. When Paul thinks of Jesus as Lord, he thinks of himself as this Lord's slave and of the world as being called to obedience to Jesus' lordship as well. *Paul has been sent not to offer a new religious option or a new way to get 'saved', but to summon the nations to allegiance to Jesus.* That will mean abandoning other loyalties. The good news issues a command, an imperial summons; the appropriate response is obedience.

The 'obedience' Paul seeks to evoke when he announces the good news is that of faith. In 10.9, Paul explains that 'faith' consists in confessing Jesus as Lord (thereby renouncing other lords) and in believing that God raised Jesus from the dead, thereby abandoning other world views in which such things did or could not happen, or not to Jesus (cf also 4.23-25). This faith is actually the human faithfulness that answers to God's faithfulness. As we will discover in Rm 3, that is why this 'faith' is the only appropriate badge of membership within God's true, renewed people.

4. To the Roman church, greetings 1.6-7

Paul has drawn a map of God's purpose as revealed in Jesus the Messiah. To this he now adds a pointer: 'you are here'. The church in Rome, predominantly Gentile, though now once again including some Jews (see the Introduction), is included among those who have responded to the good news of Jesus with the 'obedience of faith'. They are, therefore, literally 'called of Jesus the Messiah'. For Paul, the 'call' was God's powerful word,

it's the version often, but no means always, cited by the New Testament writers, and it remains the standard version of the OT used in Greek-speaking Orthodox churches.

¹⁵ This anxiety has left its mark in the NIV.

creating new life— creating, indeed, the response it sought, as a word of love is always capable of doing. And it's to God's love that Paul now appeals as he labels the church, 'God's beloved in Rome, called to be saints'. Both of these phrases look back inevitably to the status of God's people in the past, the people whom Paul sees as now renewed and expanded so as to include believing nations as well as Jews.

The greeting that follows after this densely packed introduction of Paul and his good news, is straightforward but serious. 'Grace' and 'peace' are two of Paul's greatest words for God's gift in the Messiah. 'Grace' reaches out to those in rebellion; 'peace' (*shalom*, in Hebrew) is the central covenant blessing. And, consonant with the good news itself, Paul couples the 'Lord Jesus Messiah' with 'God our Father' as the source of these gifts. In calling God 'Father', Paul is claiming for himself and his readers the status of Israel before God— for in the light of the good news, that God's people are siblings of the firstborn son (8.29).

5. Paul's desire to come to Rome 1.8-15

This section actually runs on without a break into the next (1.16-17), but the latter forms such a crucial summary of the whole letter, it will be better to treat it separately.

As usual, Paul follows his introduction with a prayer for the recipients. Here he reports his regular thanksgiving for the faith of the Roman church and his unceasing prayer that he might be able to visit them. This passes naturally into a further statement of his own apostolic vocation, amplifying what he has already said in 1.1,5 and explaining further his desire to come to Rome. This in turn leads to his summary of the letter's thesis in 1.16-17.

The faith of the Roman church was being proclaimed 'in all the world' (1.8). Presumably this means that people known to Paul, not least Jewish Christians who had left Rome under Claudius, were reporting the arrival in the capital of this strange new sect, neither ethnically Jewish (all the Christians in Rome for five years being Gentiles), but based on Judaism; composed of pagans, but no longer interested in the cosmic, political, or familiar gods of the nations they belonged to. Paul thanks God through Jesus the Messiah (another formula that is hardly a formality).

He calls God to witness to this in a somewhat strange phrase (1.9). Although regularly translated as 'whom I worship in my spirit by announcing the good news'.¹⁶ The thought is not so much that Paul performs 'service'

¹⁶ It's unclear why NIV has 'whole heart' for 'spirit'.

for God by announcing the good news, as many translations suggest, but that Paul *worships* God in his spirit (cf Ph 3.3). This is temple language. Paul carries out this 'worship' 'in the good news of [God's] son', either in the sense that announcing the good news is itself an act of worship, or in the sense that true worship now involves the proclamation of the news of God's son.

Paul's primary request, in these constant prayers, has not been so much for the growth in Christian character of the Roman church, as we might have expected, but that he will be able to visit them. However, the ultimate purpose is to impart 'some spiritual gift' to strengthen them. Rm 1.12 preempts any suggestion that he thought the Roman church, founded by someone else, was lacking anything. Paul just hopes for the mutual encouragement that comes from fellowship with others who have the same faith (he expands this in 15.14-29).

'I do not want you to be unaware' (1.13)— the double negative indicates caution. This springs, we may guess, from his anxiety about building on someone else's foundation (cf 15.20). He addresses his audience as 'brothers' (*adelphoi*; the word includes sisters). 'Friends' is a common alternative today, but it's inadequate, especially in our world of casual friendships, to express the intimacy and mutual belonging that *adelphoi* carried for Paul and his readers. He is about to answer the implicit question, 'Why would you, a pioneer evangelist, want to come to a place where a church already exists?' His answer is two-fold:

First, he has been eager to come for a long time, so that he can 'reap some harvest among you, as among the other nations' (1.13), even though so far, he has been 'prevented', either in the sense that God has not permitted it, or perhaps that Satan has hindered it, or even both.¹⁷ Either way, he remains undeterred.

Second, Paul's commission places him under obligation, not just to God, but to all categories of non-Jewish humanity, Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish (1.14). He doesn't mean that he owes them a favor, but that God has entrusted him with a message for them, and until he has discharged this commission he still owes it to them (1.15).

**6. THESIS: The good news—
God's righteousness is
now unveiled 1.16-17**

This brings him to the great statement of his theme, which he offers as a further explanation of his desire to come to Rome and announce the good news there. It

¹⁷ The Corinthian correspondence shows how Paul's plans could be thwarted; see, eg, 2Co 1.15-19.

consists of an opening statement and two successive explanations, backed up with a scriptural quotation.

In Romans and elsewhere, this style of arguing is hugely important, and we need to learn to recognize it (and we will often have to correct our translations, since they often ignore it). Paul will make an initial statement, and follow up with a series of clauses linked by the word 'for' or 'because' (*gar*): There is A, which is so because of B; which is so because of C; which is so because of D, as scripture says. Thus the final explanatory (*gar*) clause often expresses the deepest thing Paul wants to say, the logical foundation of the whole sequence. Thus, in 1.16-17, Paul is eager to preach in Rome, *because* he is not ashamed, *because* the good news is God's power, *because* in it God's righteousness is unveiled, *as it is written*. Paul's little connecting words are crucial to understanding the flow of his thought. And precisely here our translations often let us down. For instance, NIV (most popular bible on the market) omits the first 'for' at the start of 1.16; the NRSV, the second one. This destroys the connection between thoughts, and often turns a passage into a series of random musings rather than a tightly knit argument. We will see a lot of this.

Please correct your bibles wherever such words are missing!

Caesar looms unmentioned over many of Paul's works. Caesar was lord of the world, and his position was challenged and threatened by the Jewish Messiah, who claimed the same role. To come to Rome with the good news of Jesus, to announce someone else's accession to the world's throne, therefore, was to put on a red coat and walk into a field with a potentially angry bull. (This proposal might seem to be in tension with 13.1-7, but see the commentary there).

Paul does shrink from this; he is 'not ashamed of the good news'.¹⁸ The explanation (*gar*) for his not being ashamed is not that he believes in the power of positive thinking as he marches cheerfully toward danger. Rather, the good news, this message about Jesus that he has outlined in 1.3-4, is itself God's power. The good news doesn't just 'have' God's power and is not just 'accompanied by' his power; it *is* his power. There is one God who now claims the world as his own through the crucified and risen Jesus. This announcement is powerful in itself and the power is God's (cf 1Co 2.4-5; 1Th 1.5).

Paul, as so often, has expressed this point in such a way as to evoke a biblical tradition. 'In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust', says the psalmist; 'let me never be ashamed,

¹⁸ Compare Mark 8.38 and par.

deliver me in thy righteousness' (Ps 71.1-2).¹⁹ 'Shame' in such a context is what God's people feel when their enemies are triumphing; it's what Israel (and many other peoples) felt in Paul's day, suffering at the hands of Rome. The good news, and the power it carries, enables Paul to share the position of the psalmist, celebrating God's righteousness and so remaining unashamed in the face of enemies and gainsayers.²⁰

The power unleashed in the good news is 'for salvation' (*sōtēria*, 1.16). 'Salvation' is another of those 'Christian' technical terms, like 'Christ' or 'Son of God', for which most readers today assume a particular meaning that is actually a much later development. For Paul and his readers, 'salvation' did not mean rescue from hell and the enjoyment of bliss in a disembodied 'heaven' after death. Of course, death itself was now a defeated enemy. But the context remains Jewish. 'Salvation' had far more to do with Israel's rescue from pagan oppression, from Egypt or Babylon or, now, from Rome, than with 'life after death'. It's of the utmost importance that the climax of Rm 5-8 is the redemption of creation itself, not just our personal rescue from hell.

'Salvation' was also a political word, a benefit that Caesar was supposed to give to his loyal followers. As in Ph 3.20-21, Jesus turns out to be the real king of whom Caesar is a parody. There is only one 'lord of the world', there is only one 'savior', and only one 'salvation'.²¹

The salvation in question is 'for everyone who believes'. Paul will explain the significance of Christian faith in more detail in Rm 3. Here, as there, though, part of the point is that faith is open to all, 'to the Jew first and also to the Greek'. Paul insists on the primacy of the Jew within the purposes of God ('to the Jew first', corresponding to the Messiah's mission to the 'circumcised' in 15.8) and the absolute equality of status now granted to the non-Jew ('Greek' here is a way of saying 'Gentile'). If *faith* is a major theme in Romans, so is the *equality* under the good news of the two great divisions of humankind, from the Jewish point of view. These themes, as we shall see, are inseparable. Every word, every phrase in the second half of 1.16 supports the first half; that is to say, the whole clause governed by the second 'for' or 'because'

(*gar*) in the verse— '*because* it's God's power to salvation for all believers, Jew first but equally Greek'— explains why Paul is not ashamed of the good news.

The third 'for/because' (*gar*), undergirding the other two, goes to the heart of the matter, explaining in turn every aspect of 1.16b. In the good news, God's righteousness is unveiled. This revelation happens, not just in the events referred to in the good news, true though that is, but in the very announcement of the good news. The death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah initially disclosed God's righteousness— they were the major apocalyptic event that burst upon an unsuspecting world and an uncomprehending Israel— but now this apocalypse happens again, every time the message about Jesus is announced, as God's righteousness is unveiled before another audience.

The good news about Jesus, in other words, opens people's eyes to see for the first time that *this was what God had been up to all along*. It enables Jews to see how the promises they had cherished had been fulfilled, quite otherwise than they had expected. It enables Gentiles to see that there is one true God, the God of Israel, the creator; that this God has purposed to set the world right at last; and that this God has now in principle accomplished that purpose. And when we say 'enables to see', we should not think merely of propositions commanding intellectual assent. The announcement of the good news wields a power that overcomes unseen forces both inside people and around them, that prevent them from responding in obedient belief and allegiance (see 2Co 4.1-6).

It's important to note that the NIV and other translations to the effect that 'a righteousness from God is revealed' presuppose the problematic understanding which we've already discussed to some extent in the Introduction. To speak of 'a righteousness from God' instead of God's own righteousness, is to refer to a status that Christians have as a result of God's action. There's no warrant for such an idea in Paul's Jewish background, and it would make 3.21-26 very problematic, and split off Rm 9-11 from Rm 1-8, since in 9-11 the questions Paul is addressing are precisely those summarized by the notion of God's own righteousness. Paul knew what he was saying, and was in control of his language. We must not let the doctrines of a later age mess with his words.

God's righteousness is revealed 'from faith to faith'.²² In the light of 3.21-22 and other passages, the most natural meaning of this dense and cryptic phrase is, 'from God's

¹⁹ Cf also Ps 31.1-3; 143.1; Psalm 71 continues to emphasize the same theme in 1.15-16, 19, 24, by which time it's the psalmist's opponents who are 'ashamed', while he continues to speak of God's righteousness

²⁰ Isa 50.7-8 and others may be parallel as well. See RB Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 38-39.

²¹ See NT Wright, 'Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire', in Richard A. Horsely, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 2000) 160-83, available at ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Paul_Caesar_Empire.pdf

²² NRSV has 'through faith to faith'. Paul says, 'from (or: out of) faith, to faith'. NIV has 'by faith from first to last'. Augustine, sees 1.17 as describing a transference from faith in the law to faith in the good news.

faithfulness to human faithfulness'.²³ When God's faithful fulfillment of the covenant is unveiled in Jesus the Messiah, it's received by a human faith that is also *faithfulness* to the call of God in Jesus the Messiah.

Paul finishes his thesis statement by quoting—

Hk 2.4 *'The righteous one shall live by faith'.*

This innocent-looking quotation has generated enormous discussion.²⁴ We need to enquire as to the wider context of the original sentence and the echoes Paul may have intended alert readers to hear.

The original passage in Habakkuk belongs within a book full of woe and puzzlement. The Chaldeans are marching against Israel; all seems lost. What is Israel's God up to in allowing it? This is precisely a question about God's righteousness or justice. The prophet is given a vision, but it's a vision for the future, to be revealed later (Hk 2.3). At the moment God's true people, the righteous within a sinful nation, 'will live by faith(fulness)'. 'Faith(fulness)' here, whether human, as in the Hebrew text, or divine, as in the LXX, is the key feature of the interim period.

What does this mean in practice for the prophet? It means believing that God will eventually punish the idolatrous and violent nation (2.5-20), that God will remember mercy in the midst of wrath and bring salvation to Israel (3.2-19). This thematic parallel with Rm 1.18-3.20 and 3.21-4.25 is striking. Faced with pagan idolatry and arrogance, the devout first-century Jew longed for God's righteousness to break forth, bringing wrath on the nations and salvation for Israel. But Paul has seen God's purpose unveiled in the good news and believes, like the prophet, that this vision is the key to understanding all that will now take place.

This solution to the problem of first-century Israel produces a second-order problem: Much of ethnic Israel is failing to believe the good news, while Gentiles are coming in in droves. Paul will deal with that in due course. For the moment he contents himself with the cryptic, but evocative, quotation. He is not ashamed of the good news, because it's God's power to salvation for all believers; because, faced with a world in idolatry and ruin, God's righteousness is revealed in the good news; divine

²³ *ek pisteōs... eis pistin* in 1.17 corresponds quite closely to *dia pisteōs... eis pantas tous pisteuontas* in 3.22 (see also Ga 3.22).

²⁴ The original Hebrew means 'the righteous shall live by his faithfulness', but the LXX interprets this as 'the righteous shall live by my faithfulness', and Paul quotes it as 'the righteous shall live by faith[fulness]'. But does 'by faith' modify 'live' or 'righteous'? Where does the emphasis then fall— 'the righteous shall live *by faith*' or 'the one who is righteous by faith *shall have life*'? And how does Paul intend the quotation to support what has gone before? All these matters, obviously, interlock.

faithfulness reaches down and calls forth the response of human faithfulness. In this setting, 'the righteous shall live by faithfulness'; whether divine or human or both, Paul doesn't need to say. The sentence remains cryptic until we reach 3.21-4.25.

Part of the strength of this exegesis of 1.17 is the sense it makes of the transition to 1.18, which has long been a puzzle to students of Paul's flow of thought. But before moving to the next section of the letter, a word is needed about the road we have traveled thus far.

Romans has been thought of for centuries as the letter in which Paul expounds his doctrine of 'justification by faith'. This half-truth has opened up some aspects of the letter and concealed others. The theological content of this substantial opening section contains 'justification by faith' within it by implication, but *this is not the stated theme of the letter*. The theme is, to repeat once more, **the revelation of God's righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, his justice, in and through the good news proclamation of the crucified and risen Messiah.**

Like the two opening themes of a classical sonata, Paul's summary of 'the good news' in 1.3-4 and his summary of 'God's righteousness' in 1.16-17 will do further business with each other as the work progresses, and their contrapuntal interweaving will support other harmonic progressions. But this letter has announced itself as a treatment, not so much of humans, their plight and their rescue (though that has its place), but of God— his good news, his righteousness. We will not understand Romans unless we grasp this from the outset and remember it throughout.

I strongly suggest memorizing 1.3-4 and 1.16-17. These are among a handful of key verses that will greatly help you to understand the rest of the letter.

'The good news', in Paul's terminology, was not primarily a message about sinful human beings and how they attained justification and salvation. If we want to understand and appropriate Paul, we have to use his words in his way. For him, the 'good news' was the sovereign message, from none other than God, concerning Jesus the Messiah, his unique son. This message was not just the offer of a new reordering of one's private spiritual interiority, a new clearing up of a morally dysfunctional life via forgiveness for the past and new moral energy for the present. It was not just a new vocation to live for God and for others in the world. It was, rather, news about God and about Jesus; news that this Jesus had become the spearhead of God's 'messianic age'; news that, even within this present age, the principalities and powers, including earthly rulers, the powers of darkness, and sin and death themselves have been defeated and are now

summoned to allegiance. 'The good news' is a command requiring obedience, much more than an invitation seeking a response.

Always the command comes out of the blue, unexpected and in many ways unwelcome. Paul's contemporary Jews neither expected nor wanted a crucified Messiah. Paul's contemporary Gentiles neither expected nor wanted to worship and serve a Jewish figure, still less a Jewish failure (cf 1Co 1.18-2.5). Our own contemporaries, long schooled to regard the climax of world history as having occurred in Western Europe in the eighteenth century (giving birth, of course, to modern North America), neither expect nor want to hear that the true climax in fact occurred in Palestine in the first century AD. Surely, indeed, the world has not improved (did Paul say it had or would?); surely Christianity has been responsible for many great evils (in part, yes, though often demonstrably when in rebellion against the good news itself); surely we now know that resurrection is just a myth (actually, no, we don't). We have to take these objections seriously; but they are often just smoke screens to hide the fact that the grandiose claims of 'modernity' are now themselves looking increasingly threadbare. The command of the good news is a summons to give the allegiance of body and mind, heart and soul, to Jesus; and its basis is neither more nor less than the event that constituted him in Paul's eyes as Messiah and Lord— namely, his resurrection. And it's in proclaiming this good news, and accepting it in faith, that people begin to glimpse a great curtain drawing aside and God's covenant faithfulness and justice coming into view.

B. The challenge to God: Gentiles and Jews alike are guilty of idolatry and injustice 1.18–3.20

The first *major section* (1.18–3.20) of the letter is a courtroom scene played backwards. It opens with the sentencing; explains the grounds for the verdict, highlights the problems that the judge has had in hearing the case, and concludes with the guilty parties in the dock, with nothing to say in their defense.

This scene is all about God's righteousness, both in the sense that he is the judge in the cosmic lawcourt and in the sense that he is in covenant with Israel, which is a problem because Israel, too, is guilty.

The whole section serves as a further explanation of 1.16-17; hence it is connected to the previous passage by a 'for' or 'because' (*gar*) in 1.18 that is omitted in the NIV. In particular, 1.18–3.20 explains *why* the good news is God's saving power for all who believe: *because (gar)* in it God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness (1.18). And since it turns out that 'all sinned,

and came short of God's glory' (3.23, summing up 1.18–3.20), there is no alternative route to salvation apart from the good news.

This section, though, is not just about the 'human plight'. It's about *God's problem* here, and it gives a preliminary statement of God's way of dealing with it. God created us to bear his image in creation, and once we fell, he called Israel to shine his light into the dark world. Faced with human rebellion and then with Jewish faithlessness, will he then abandon these projects? Paul repeatedly emphasizes that God will remain faithful, though he doesn't yet explain how— except that God's 'wrath' means precisely his determination not to give evil the last word, to root out from the good creation all that defaces and destroys it. So already we are looking ahead both to the end of Rm 8, with the renewal of humans and of creation, and to the end of Rm 11, when 'all Israel shall be saved'. Because the creator God is implacably opposed to the forces of evil, there is hope. The revelation of wrath is itself, however paradoxically, part of the good news. As in the context of Habakkuk, quoted in 1.17, the whole world is in turmoil, but God remains sovereign. This prepares the way for the solution: As in Habakkuk once more, God's people are defined, at this moment of crisis, in terms of *faithfulness*. The portion of the letter that begins with 1.18 does indeed explain and unpack what is implicit in the dense statement of 1.16-17.

Two elements of Paul's strategy throughout the section are worthy of note:

1. Paul draws extensively on traditional Jewish critiques of the pagan world. This section, particularly the first long paragraph, echoes Wi 12–16, which, under the guise of describing the wickedness of the Canaanites and Egyptians at the time of the exodus, launches a polemic against paganism in general, describing it in terms of idolatry and the consequent fracturing of human society. Paul agrees with this assessment of paganism, but he goes further, and by doing so effectively undercuts Wisdom's eventual point. Wisdom argued that the Israelites, rebellious in the wilderness, escaped with punishments that served as a warning and a reminder of God's law (Wi 16.5-6, 10-11). Paul will not have it. The Jews, he declares, are just as guilty as the pagans; all alike end up in the dock (3.19-20).

Because Wi 12–16 is so important in Paul's background, I have provided it in an appendix.

2. Paul argues his case by a process of gradual unfolding. At first sight, 1.18-32 seems to be directed solely against the Gentiles; but at two points he al-

cludes to scriptural passages that suggest that Israel, too, has behaved in a pagan manner and will receive the appropriate reward. Then again in 2.1-16 he seems to be aiming at the tradition of pagan moralism; but, not least with Wisdom in mind, it seems he's also thinking of the virtuous Jew (including his own pre-Christian self, of course) looking with disdain on the ungodly and dissolute pagan world. And then he turns explicitly to Israel's boast in 2.17, deconstructing it from Scripture itself, and bringing into the open what he has already hinted. From then on he focuses almost entirely on Israel: failing in covenant obligations (2.17-24); being upstaged by a new covenant family, which includes Gentiles (2.25-29); joining the pagans in the dock (3.1-20).

A good deal of the material in 1.18–3.20 looks ahead to later passages in the letter. The devastation of humanness brought about by idolatry, described in Rm 1, is reversed through the good news, as Rm 4, 6, 8, and 12 bear witness. God's covenant purposes for Israel, to which Israel was unfaithful, are fulfilled in the faithful Messiah (3.21-26; 5.12-21, and throughout). The Exodus, the subtext of the Wisdom passage upon which Paul draws in 1.18-32, forms the subtext, too, of Paul's exposition of the new people of God in the Messiah in Rm 5–8. Above all, the problem of God's righteousness, highlighted in the dense little argument of 3.1-8, looks ahead to the whole theme of Rm 9–11, where Paul will draw on another image from Wisdom: the potter and the clay (Rm 9.19-22; Wi 15.7; cf Wi 12.12). The present section is far more than a mere exposé of human sinfulness. Within the architecture of the whole letter, it begins the construction of several great arches, which, having reached their various peaks in reference to Jesus the Messiah, come back to earth in the specific conclusions of the different stages of the argument.

1. God is unveiling his wrath against idolatry and injustice 1.18-32

After the lofty and evocative introduction, the main body of the letter begins with energy and passion. Paul explains and denounces idolatry and the fracturing of human life that results from it. 'Sin'²⁵— living in a less-than-fully-human fashion, missing the mark as regards God's intention for his human creatures— is the result of worshipping something other than the creator. And this idolatry itself is culpable and worthy of punishment, since creation is full of signs of the creator. Enclosing the

whole story are thus the bracketing statements: The wrath of God is revealed (1.18); his verdict is that those who do such things deserve to die (1.32).

Between the brackets, the paragraph has a thesis statement and three sentencing sequences in the form, 'They exchanged, so God gave them up' (1.22-24, 1.25-27, 1.28-31), each spotlighting one aspect of human corruption and degradation that results from idolatry. The climax of the paragraph is the catalog of vices in 1.29-31, arranged less for comprehensiveness (though it is ample!) than for maximum rhetorical effect.

The opening paragraph of Paul's main argument thus has the following structure:

- 1.18 God's wrath is being revealed.
- 1.19-21 The reason: Idolaters have ignored God's 'power and divinity', refused to glorify him, and become worthless.
- 1.22-31 Sentencing: three crimes and three punishments
 - 1.22-23 'They exchanged the glory of the uncorruptible God for the likeness of an image' of different kinds of bodies,
 - 1.24 God handed them over to dishonor of their bodies.
 - 1.25 They exchanged God's truth for a lie, worshipping creation instead of the creator.
 - 1.26-27 God handed them over to sexualities incapable of bearing the blessing of Adam ('be fruitful and multiply, Gn 1.28).
 - 1.28a They did not test²⁶ whether they were keeping God in mind.
 - 1.28b God handed them over to a mind that didn't pass the test,
 - 1.29-31 And to a whole catalogue of vices.
- 1.32 God's verdict: they deserve to die.

²⁵ The word 'sin' (*hamartia*) doesn't appear in Rm 1; but when Paul uses it later to summarize the human condition, he is clearly referring back to this passage, among others.

²⁶ Δοκιμάζω ('test, prove') and its cognates appear a 47 times in the OT, usually having to do with the assaying of precious metals, and then metaphorically of testing (and purifying) Israel or persons representing Israel: Note Ps 11.7; 16.3; 25.2; 65.10; 67.31; 80.8; 94.9; 138.1, 23; note Zc 11.13; 13.9; ; note exp. Wi 1.3 ('crooked thoughts separate from God, and his power, when tried, reproves the unwise (ἄφρονες); note also in particular Jr 6.27; 9.6; 11.20; 12.3; 17.10; 20.12.

All of this is standard Jewish fare, but those versed in the prophets will recognize that it has an unexpected twist.

**a. Bracket opens (cf 1.32):
God's wrath 1.18**

The opening section, leading to the first of the judge's three hammer blows ('They exchanged; God gave them up'), introduces us to a major theme within Paul's indictment of the human race: Humans suppress the truth in their injustice (1.18).

God's wrath is a prominent theme throughout Scripture. God is not a malevolent despot, hurling thunderbolts at those who broke arbitrary laws,²⁷ but unless he is implacably opposed to the evil that distorts and defaces creation, not least humanity, he is not a good God. In Paul's whole theology, the creator is neither a tyrannical despot nor an indulgent 'daddy', nor indeed just the inner or spiritual dimension of all that is. He is the creator and lover of the world. He has a passionate concern for creation, and for humans in particular, and will tolerate nothing less than the best for them.

The result is 'wrath'— not just a settled attitude of hostility toward idolatry and immorality, but an active and forceful response to it. But the content of this wrath is not just the process described in the rest of the chapter of 'giving people up' to the results of their own folly; that's just the anticipation of the final judgment itself, the 'death' spoken of in 1.32 and the ultimate judgment described in 2.5-6,9.

This wrath is revealed 'from the sky' (or 'from heaven', but Greek doesn't make that distinction), in the *present* time. As with all of Paul's 'apocalyptic' theology, the 'end' expected by Second Temple Jews has split into two; in one sense it has already happened, but in another sense it's yet to happen (2.5; see also 1Co 15.12-28). So although the wrath is still to be revealed in the future, it has in some sense been brought forward into the present. What sense is that, though?

The events concerning Jesus has unveiled the wrath of God in a new way. Paul's point is not that the moral corruption of the pagan world provides a fresh revelation of God's wrath and lightning is going to start striking from the sky any minute now. Pagans have always been behaving like that, at least from Paul's Jewish standpoint. But the fact of Jesus has drawn back the veil on the wrath to come.

How has this happened? The answer is provided in 2.16. God, writes Paul, will judge the secrets of humans, *according to my good news, through the Messiah, Jesus.*

²⁷ The classic statement of this position may be found in C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Collins Fontana, 1959) 47-50.

Drawing on the Jewish tradition that the Messiah would be the judge of the whole world, Paul sees that his good news involves the announcement that God has fixed a day on which the world will be called to account. The agent of this divinely appointed judgment will be Jesus; and he has made this clear by raising him from the dead (see Ac 17.31; other links between Romans 1 and Ac 17 are noted below).

This explains the train of thought that leads Paul into 1.18. The same good news message that functions as God's saving power (1.3-4, 16) also names the judge and confirms his appointment. A new moment of world history has come to birth. Between the resurrection and the final judgment, the world, whether it acknowledges it or not, lives before the judge's unveiled gaze.

But it doesn't, of course, recognize or acknowledge the fact. Paul's basic charge (like so many of his introductory sentences, it contains the rest of the passage in a nutshell) is that humans, in their idolatry and injustice, suppress the truth, and do so precisely by means of injustice (*adikia*). This is not just 'wickedness', as in many translations— not just general evil but, specifically, *injustice*, the crucial symptom of the world's out-of-jointness. Human injustice contrasts sharply with God's covenant justice (1.17). Paul's language is too tightly integrated to allow for loose translation. The truth is dangerous— so rebellious humans suppress it, hide it away, try to prevent its leaking out of their hard hearts and systems of oppression.

**b. The reason for God's wrath:
Idolaters ignore what God
has shown them 1.19-21**

Characteristically, Paul fills out his initial statement with three layers of explanation. God's self-revelation has displayed what can be known; this revelation takes place in the created order, rendering all without excuse; humans have refused to honor God in the appropriate way.

These verses have had to bear the weight of debates about 'natural theology' (the question of whether, and to what extent, the truth of God is accessible through the created order without the aid of special revelation). Unfortunately, the few passages like this one or Ac 17.22-31 which are taken to teach that idea offers a full-dress exposition of it; they are only allusions on the way to making some other point. But Paul clearly thinks that when humans look at creation they are aware, at some level, of the creator's power and divinity. Paul doesn't say that we can find a *saving* knowledge of God through observing the creation, but he doesn't say that nothing can be known of God that way, either. But like his Jewish contemporaries, he believes— since the world was made by

a good creator— that signs of the creator are visible in the world (see, eg, Wi 13.5).²⁸ But these are just enough to ensure that when humans rebel— as they do— they are manifestly guilty.

The appropriate response to the divine self-revelation in creation would have been worship and thanksgiving. Instead, human thought became futile and foolish, and human hearts (not 'minds' as in some translations) became darkened.

In 1.21, Paul says 'they became vain in their imaginations'. His word for 'became vain' (*mataiōthēsan*) occurs only seven times in the OT, three of which are directly on Paul's present point.²⁹

Jr 2.5 'Thus says Yhwh, What perversity have your fathers found in me, that they have revolted far from me, and gone after vanities (*mataiōn*) and become vain (*mataiōthēsan*)?'

2Kg 17.15 'They rejected his rules, the covenant he had made with their ancestors, and the laws he had commanded them to obey. They paid allegiance to worthless things (*mataiōn*), and so became worthless (*mataiōthēsan*) to the LORD. They copied the practices of the surrounding nations in blatant disregard of the LORD's command.'

Jr 23.16 'Thus says Yhwh of Hosts, Don't listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you: they are worthless (*mataiousin*); they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of Yahweh.'

All of these are noteworthy for the fact that they speak against idolatrous religion in *Israel*.

At the same time, a contrast between Adam and the Messiah as second Adam is very much already present in 1.20-25. If we substitute 'Adam' for 'they' or 'those people' in 1.20-25 it reads almost like a paraphrase of the creation-story: 'Ever since the creation of the world, the invisible existence of God and his everlasting power have been clearly seen by the mind's understanding of created things. And so [Adam] has no excuse: [he] knew God and yet did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but [his] arguments became futile and [his] uncomprehending mind was darkened. While [he] claimed to be

wise, in fact [he] was growing so stupid that he exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an imitation, for the image of a mortal human being or of birds or of animals or of crawling things'.³⁰

All the elements are here in this return to the creation-story, the initial knowledge of God, the refusal to honour or give thanks to God, the attempt to seek knowledge which in fact plunges into deeper ignorance, the loss of glory.

The catalogue of sin which follows is itself reminiscent of Genesis. First is detailed idolatry (1.24-25), which Ws 14.27 says is the beginning, cause and end of every evil (and the allusion to the serpent in v.23). Then comes sexual perversion (1.26-27), which may reflect the intercourse of the angels with the daughters of men in Gn 6.1-4, or may reflect the rabbinic teaching that lust was the serpent's original temptation. Finally the catalogue of various sins 1.28-32 reflects the general spread of evil which provoked the Flood.

- c. **A triple sentencing:**
They abandon God,
God abandons them **1.22-31**
- 1. They exchanged God's**
glory for the likeness
of images **1.22-23**

The result of the refusal to know God through creation is the false boast of humans and the corruption of worship into idolatry. Here Paul is deliberately, though not explicitly retelling the stories of the fall of Adam (Gn 3) and of Israel and the golden calf (Ex 32).

Talk of God the *creator* has already laid the groundwork. In Gn 3, the serpent entices Eve to eat the fruit that will make humans wise (Gen 3.6). The primal sin was a matter of seeking to boast in an wisdom independent of the creator. But this wisdom ended in the greatest folly possible— namely, in exchanging the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of a corruptible human being, and also of birds, animals, and serpents.

'Exchanging' God's glory for idols echoes Ps 106.20, which speaks of Israel 'exchanging' the living God for the golden calf. The Wisdom of Solomon, written most likely not long before his own day, said that Israel in the wilderness might have committed sins, but it would receive only a mild, correcting rebuke because it was God's own people. In general, Israel stands out from the pagan Egyptians. But for Paul, as for the writer of Ps 106, Israel rejected the covenant God and ended up copying the

²⁸ See also Letter of Aristeas 132; 2Bar 54.17-22; Philo *On Rewards and Punishments* 43; and, in non-Jewish sources, Pseudo-Aristotle *De Mundo (On the Universe)* 399ab; Epictetus *Discourses* 1.6.19. The essay by G. Bornkamm, *Early Christian Experience* (London: SCM 1969) Rm 3, remains important.

²⁹ The others are regarding Saul, 1Sm 13.13; 26.21; regarding David, 1Ch 21.8; Judith's words in Jdt 6.4.

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pagans (see further at 7.9-11; 9.15-16).³¹ This not only anticipates the explicit turn in the argument at 2.17, but it also looks ahead to 7.7-12, where once again the narratives of Adam and Israel are woven together.

2. So God handed them over to dishonor their bodies 1.24

As a result of this exchange of God for idols, 'God handed them over'— a phrase Paul will repeat at 1.26 and 1.28— 'in the desires of their hearts to uncleanness, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves' (1.24). 'God handed them over' echoes (though in different words) the ideas of Ps 81.12,³² a hymnic retelling of the exodus narrative, warning of idolatry, bemoaning the fact that Israel has not heeded the warning, and appealing for the people to return to Yhwh. Once again, Paul's surface text describes paganism, but quietly indicts Israel as well. The result is that the creator allows them to reap what they've sown. The punishment not only fits the crime, but directly results from it as well: Those who dishonor God by worshipping images of creatures must not be surprised if they dishonor their own bodies as a result of the desires of their hearts.

3. They exchanged God's truth for a lie, worshipping creation instead of creator 1.25

Paul focuses his general charge (1.22-23) in a new way in 1.25: Humans have exchanged God's truth for a lie and have venerated and worshipped creation instead of the creator. At this point, Paul himself pauses to worship 'the creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen'.

4. So God handed them over to passions of dishonor and to unfruitful relations 1.26-27

The indictment, 'They exchanged God's truth for a lie' (1.25) leads to a second 'God handed them over'— this time to 'passions of dishonor' (1.26).

In particular, after the general comment about dishonoring their bodies (1.24), Paul now describes particular passions (*pathē*) that make people less than what humans were meant to be. A *pathos* is not a 'vice' so much as a force that overthrows your self-control.

Paul could have highlighted many different passions, vices, or injustices in the pagan world, but the result of exchanging God's truth for a lie that he chooses is homosexual practice, both female and male. Contrary to every expectation, he even puts the female first, which seems to give it emphasis.

Paul hardly ever so much as mentions same-sex practices elsewhere; 1Co 6.9 and 1Tm 1.10 do refer to it in passing; there he mentions men only, alluding to Lv 18:22 and 20:13; but these are simply items in a much broader list. Rm 1.26-27 is the only passage in Paul, or in the NT generally, that puts homosexual behavior in an explicitly theological context. This leaves us quite puzzled. Why does he so startlingly single out same-sex erotic practices, and why does he mention women first, as if emphasizing something that is hardly even mentioned in all of ancient literature, particularly when he has been discussing *truth* and *injustice*?

Within Paul's Jewish point of view, same-sex practices have come about because humans 'venerated and worshipped creation instead of the Creator'; in response, God has handed them over to their own desires. Jews regarded homosexual practice as a classic example of pagan vice. Those who worship the true God are, as Paul says elsewhere, renewed according to the divine image (Col 3.10), but when true worship is exchanged for idolatry, the human image-bearing quality gets distorted.

We will begin to understand what Paul is getting at when we recall that he is retelling the story of Adam's fall (Gn 3). In eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam forfeited the blessing that he had received in the beginning. That blessing was, 'Be fruitful and multiply' (1.28). This blessing would have been particularly acute in the high-mortality, short-lifespan context of antiquity. At about the time Paul was writing, Roman law decreed that people *must* get married, to keep the population up.

Homosexual behavior is a fracture of the creator's design for reproduction. This fracture has come about because people have been worshipping gods other than the true one.

Paul adds the comment that those who do these things receive in themselves 'the payback (*antimisthian*) of their error (*planē*)' (1.27).³³ indicates a general wandering off course; 'perversion' (NIV) is overprecise and judgmental). Because Paul did not specify anything in particular when

³¹ Several Jewish traditions regarded the golden calf incident as a critical turn in Jewish history. These are cataloged in Samuel Vollenweider, *Freiheit als neue Schöpfung*, FRLANT (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989) 258. See also S.J. Hafemann, *Paul, Moses and the History of Israel: The Letter/Spirit Contrast and the Argument from Scripture in 2 Corinthians 3* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson 1995) 227-31.

³² 'So I let them go after the pursuits of their own hearts: they will go on in their own pursuits' (Ps 80.12 LXX). Paul speaks of 'desires' (*epithymia*); the psalm says 'pursuits' (*epitēdeumata*).

³³ *Planē* later became an important term in Christian ascetical literature. Its literal Latin translation is *error*, 'wandering', and its russian equivalent, *prelest*. In this ascetical context, it means 'spiritual delusion', which is somewhat more specific, but not far from Paul's meaning here.

he said that idolaters ‘received in themselves the pay-back of their error which was fitting’ (1.27)— and because people have not kept in mind that same-sex practices were only an example of where humanity in general has fractured— people have proposed different maladies or punishments for gay people as fulfilling this verse. AIDS is often cruelly cited as ‘God’s punishment for gays’, even though the disease affects many others; and these two verses have been used to justify outright murder as well. So it is imperative for us to get this right. Unfortunately, it’s impossible to find any commentary that really satisfies, unless we’re predisposed to accept it already. But that’s possibly only when we’re happy with our prejudices (whatever they are).

The answer will not appear until Rm 4, but for now it’s important to recognize that Paul refuses to posit a catalog of sins— let alone to single out same-sex behavior— as the cause of human alienation from God. Rather, all the ‘passions of dishonor’ (1.26) follow from the primary rebellion of the creature against the Creator (1:18-21). Because human beings did not acknowledge God, ‘they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened’ (1.21). Paul is not simply denouncing the pagan vices he loves to hate most; he is diagnosing the human condition. The diseased behavior detailed in verses 24-31, including unfruitful sex, is symptomatic of the sickness of humanity as a whole. Rm 1 does not aim to teach a code of sexual ethics, or to warn the guilty of God’s impending wrath. Rather, Paul is offering a diagnosis of the disordered human condition: he adduces the fact of widespread homosexual behavior as evidence of human rebellion against the creator. Homosexuality is not a provocation of God’s wrath but a consequence of his decision to hand his rebellious creatures over to their own futile desires.³⁴

It would be wrong to press 1.26-27 for a full analysis of same-sex desires or practices; but equally it’s wrong to minimize or marginalize what Paul teaches here. He is not saying, even though in an individualistic culture he is inevitably read as saying, that individuals who are aware of same-sex erotic tendencies or who engage in the practices that result have themselves been worshipping idols. He is not proposing a case-by-case analysis. Rather, his argument is that the existence of same-sex practice is a sign that that humanity as a whole has been worshipping idols and that its God-given male-and-female order has been fractured as a result.

We can’t isolate these verses from Paul’s larger argument, both in this paragraph and in Romans as a whole.

³⁴ See RB Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996) 379-406.

It’s clear that he regards homosexual practice as a derailment. We might want to disagree, or insist that in the light of our greater knowledge of human psychology we need to reassess the matter. I personally do not think those arguments will be fruitful one way or the other. But we can’t pretend that this passage is irrelevant to our moral teaching, or to the rest of Romans; nor that it means something other than what it says. But we don’t know yet what it says. We will have to wait till Rm 4, when the whole story will emerge into view.

Meanwhile, though, it’s important to remind ourselves, of course, that Rm 1 is followed at once by Rm 2, with its emphatic warning against a moral superiority complex. Paul’s most damning condemnation is reserved, not for those who engage in same-sex practices, but for those who adopt a posture of innate moral virtue while themselves failing in their most basic vocation, to be the light of the world.

5. They did not test whether they were keeping God in mind 1.28a

The third crime and punishment sequence is a ‘just as... so’ structure that begins, ‘And just as they did not test (*edokimasan*) whether they had God in recognition...’ (1.28a). The word for ‘test, prove’ (*dokimazō*) and its cognates primarily has to do with the assaying of precious metals, and then metaphorically of testing (and purifying) Israel or persons representing Israel.³⁵ In particular we should note Jr 17.10: ‘I, Yhwh, search the mind, I test the heart, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings’.

6. So God handed them over to a mind that fails to pass the test 1.28b

Just as they did not test, ‘[so] God gave them up to a mind (*nous*) that fails to pass the test (*adokimon*)’ (1.28b). Most translations fail to retain the wordplay that encapsulate the point.

This failed *nous* becomes the source of inappropriate deeds; Paul’s view of sin, once more, is not that it’s the breaking of arbitrary divine rules but that it’s subhuman or nonhuman behavior, deeds that are unfitting for humans to perform.

³⁵ Note Ps 11.7; 16.3; 25.2; 65.10; 67.31; 80.8; 94.9; 138.1, 23; note Zc 11.13; 13.9; ; note exp. Wi 1.3 (‘crooked thoughts separate from God, and his power, when tried, reproves the unwise (ἄφρονας); note also in particular Jr 6.27; 9.6; 11.20; 12.3; 17.10; 20.12.

**a. And to a whole
catalogue of vices 1.29-31**

Such people are full, Paul says twice, of all kinds of evil; like jugs filled to overflowing with noxious liquids, they are brimful of wickedness, ready to spill over at any moment. Paul's catalog of vices is arranged for rhetorical effect and reads better in Greek than in any possible English version. Its last four resounding words: *asynetous*, *asynthetous*, *astorgous*, *aneleēmonas* are best rendered as— 'without brains, honor, love, or pity'. Paul's main concern is not to provide an exhaustive or logically ordered list of all the ways in which idolatry defaces human behavior, but to paint a picture in the richest verbal colors and patterns that he could find.

**2. Bracket closes (cf 1.18):
God's verdict 1.32**

The final comment (1.32) is the most devastating. They know God's just decree (for *δικαίωμα* *dikaiōma* see the Commentary on 8.4)— namely, that those who do such things deserve to die. Paul is again appealing to something that, in theory at least, the whole human race is aware of. He is not saying that all humans have somehow heard of a law that prescribes the death penalty for certain types of behavior. Rather, he asserts that humans in general have an innate awareness that certain types of behavior are inherently dehumanizing. Those who behave in these ways are destroying themselves, and at a deep level they are aware of the fact. And he is, finally, alluding to the consequence given to Adam at the same time as the commandment: 'the day that you eat of it you will surely die' (Gn 2.17).

Nevertheless, they not only do these things but also applaud those who practice them. It's one thing to live a self-destructive lifestyle, recognizing it for what it's, grieving over it, and urging others to avoid it if they can. It's another, more sinister, thing to call evil good and good evil. Once light and darkness have been renamed, the process of dehumanization is complete and may well prove irreversible.

There is such a thing as human wickedness, and if God doesn't oppose it relentlessly, then he himself colludes with destructive and dehumanizing practices. We have seen enough evil in the 20th century to be in no doubt of systemic injustice, rooted in the reality of wickedness deep within the human heart. Within such settings, 'embrace' (a gentle liberal toleration of different viewpoint, is not enough; there must also be 'exclusion', the making and implementing of 'no' as well. Finding the appropri-

ate coexistence of those two is an urgent task for our day.³⁶

In particular, paganism is alive and well. The worship of blood and soil, and the symbols that evoke them, was characteristic of the Nazi movement and remains all too familiar within the tribal and geographical disputes that still disfigure our planet, even within Orthodoxy. The worship of Mammon, of the absolute sovereignty of 'economic forces' and banks 'too big to fail' whatever the human cost, is the foundation of our economic system. Eros, the god of sexual love, claims millions of devotees who genuinely believe they are bound to obey its every dictate, however many times its grandiose promises prove hollow. Mars, the god of war, is worshipped by many, tolerated by many more, and still wreaks havoc. And even nature worship is growing, as the old 'god' of eighteenth-century Deism has disappeared from view, leaving a vacuum to be filled by the 'forces' within the created order, producing various kinds of pantheism and/or 'magick'.

Rm 1.18-32 anticipates the problem highlighted in 7.7-25, where the 'wretched person' knows what ought to be done but cannot do it. Equally, it points on to 12.1-2, where the 'renewal of the mind', enabling one to think clearly about what God approves, is the key to presenting the body in God's service.

³⁶ See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).