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LIGUORI CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDY



Letters *to the* Romans *and* Galatians

RECONCILING THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

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Introduction to *Liguori Catholic Bible Study*

READING THE BIBLE can be daunting. It's a complex book, and many a person of goodwill has tried to read the Bible and ended up putting it down in utter confusion. It helps to have a companion, and *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is a solid one. Over the course of this series, you'll learn about biblical messages, themes, personalities, and events and understand how the books of the Bible rose out of the need to address new situations.

Across the centuries, people of faith have asked, "Where is God in this moment?" Millions of Catholics look to the Bible for encouragement in their journey of faith. Wisdom teaches us not to undertake Bible study alone, disconnected from the Church that was given Scripture to share and treasure. When used as a source of prayer and thoughtful reflection, the Bible comes alive.

Your choice of a Bible-study program should be dictated by what you want to get out of it. One goal of *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is to give readers greater familiarity with the Bible's structure, themes, personalities, and message. But that's not enough. This program will also teach you to use Scripture in your prayer. God's message is as compelling and urgent today as ever, but we get only part of the message when it's memorized and stuck in our heads. It's meant for the entire person—physical, emotional, and spiritual.

We're baptized into life with Christ, and we're called to live more fully with Christ today as we practice the values of justice, peace, forgiveness, and community. God's new covenant was written on the hearts of the people of Israel; we, their spiritual descendants, are loved that intimately

by God today. *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* will draw you closer to God, in whose image and likeness we are fashioned.

Group and Individual Study

The *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* series is intended for group and individual study and prayer. This series gives you the tools to start a study group. Gathering two or three people in a home or announcing the meeting of a Bible-study group in a parish or community can bring surprising results. Each lesson in this series contains a section to help groups study, reflect, pray, and share biblical reflections. Each lesson also has a second section for individual study.

Many people who want to learn more about the Bible don't know where to begin. This series gives them a place to start and helps them continue until they're familiar with all the books of the Bible.

Bible study can be a lifelong project, always enriching those who wish to be faithful to God's Word. When people complete a study of the whole Bible, they can begin again, making new discoveries with each new adventure into the Word of God.



Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)

BIBLE STUDY isn't just a matter of gaining intellectual knowledge of the Bible; it's also about gaining a greater understanding of God's love and concern for creation. The purpose of reading and knowing the Bible is to enrich our relationship with God. God loves us and gave us the Bible to illustrate that love. As Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, a study of the Bible is not only an intellectual pursuit but also a spiritual adventure that should influence our dealings with God and neighbor.

The Meaning of *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina is a Latin expression that means "divine or sacred reading." The process for *lectio divina* consists of Scripture readings, reflection, and prayer. Many clergy, religious, and laity use *lectio divina* in their daily spiritual reading to develop a closer and more loving relationship with God. Learning about Scripture has as its purpose the living of its message, which demands a period of reflection on the Scripture passages.

Prayer and *Lectio Divina*

Prayer is a necessary element for the practice of *lectio divina*. The entire process of reading and reflecting is a prayer. It's not merely an intellectual pursuit; it's also a spiritual one. Page 20 includes an Opening Prayer for gathering one's thoughts before moving on to the passages in each section. This prayer may be used privately or in a group. For those who use the book for daily spiritual reading, the prayer for each section may

be repeated each day. Some may wish to keep a journal of each day's meditation.

Pondering the Word of God

Lectio divina is the ancient Christian spiritual practice of reading the holy Scriptures with intentionality and devotion. This practice helps Christians center themselves and descend to the level of the heart to enter an inner quiet space, finding God.

This sacred reading is distinct from reading for knowledge or information, and it's more than the pious practice of spiritual reading. It is the practice of opening ourselves to the action and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As we intentionally focus on and become present to the inner meaning of the Scripture passage, the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds and hearts. We come to the text willing to be influenced by a deeper meaning that lies within the words and thoughts we ponder.

In this space, we open ourselves to be challenged and changed by the inner meaning we experience. We approach the text in a spirit of faith and obedience as a disciple ready to be taught by the Holy Spirit. As we savor the sacred text, we let go of our usual control of how we expect God to act in our lives and surrender our hearts and consciences to the flow of the divine (*divina*) through the reading (*lectio*).

The fundamental principle of *lectio divina* leads us to understand the profound mystery of the Incarnation, "The Word became flesh," not only in history but also within us.

Praying *Lectio* Today

Before you begin, relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). Then practice these four simple actions:

1. Read a passage from Scripture or the daily Mass readings. This is known as *lectio*. (If the Word of God is read aloud, the hearers listen attentively.)
2. Pray the selected passage with attention as you listen for a specific meaning that comes to mind. Once again, the reading is listened to or silently read and reflected or meditated on. This is known as *meditatio*.
3. The exercise becomes active. Pick a word, sentence, or idea that surfaces from your consideration of the chosen text. Does the reading remind you of a person, place, or experience? If so, pray about it. Compose your thoughts and reflection into a simple word or phrase. This prayer-thought will help you remove distractions during the *lectio*. This exercise is called *oratio*.
4. In silence, with your eyes closed, quiet yourself and become conscious of your breathing. Let your thoughts, feelings, and concerns fade as you consider the selected passage in the previous step (*oratio*). If you're distracted, use your prayer word to help you return to silence. This is *contemplatio*.

This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

Many teachers of prayer call contemplation the prayer of resting in God, a prelude to losing oneself in the presence of God. Scripture is transformed in our hearing as we pray and allow our hearts to unite intimately with the Lord. The Word truly takes on flesh, and this time it is manifested in our flesh.



How to Use This Bible-Study Companion

THE BIBLE, along with the commentaries and reflections found in this study, will help participants become familiar with the Scripture texts and lead them to reflect more deeply on the texts' message. At the end of this study, participants will have a firm grasp of the Letters to the Romans and Galatians and realize how these letters offer spiritual nourishment. This study is not only an intellectual adventure, it's also a spiritual one. The reflections lead participants into their own journey with the Scripture readings.

Context

When the author wrote the Letters to the Romans and Galatians, he didn't simply link random stories about the community—but rather, placed them in a context that often stressed a message. To help readers learn about each passage in relation to those around it, each lesson begins with an overview that puts the Scripture passages into context.

NOTE: Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible*, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Part 1: Group Study

To give participants a comprehensive study of the Letters to the Romans and Galatians, the book is divided into seven lessons. Lesson 1 is group study only; Lessons 2 through 7 are divided into Part 1, group study, and Part 2, individual study. For example, Lesson 2 covers passages from Romans 2 through 5. The study group reads and discusses only Romans 2 through 3:20 (Part 1). Participants privately read and reflect on Romans 3:21 through 5 (Part 2).

Group study may or may not include *lectio divina*. With *lectio divina*, the group meets for ninety minutes using the format on pages 17 and 18. Without *lectio divina*, the group meets for one hour using the format on page 17, and participants are urged to privately read the *lectio divina* section at the end of Part 1. It contains additional reflections on the Scripture passages studied during the group session that will take participants even further into the passages.

Part 2: Individual Study

The Scripture passages not covered in Part 1 are divided into two to six shorter components, one to be studied each day. Participants who don't belong to a study group can use the lessons for private sacred reading. They may choose to reflect on one Scripture passage per day, making it possible for a clearer understanding of the Scripture passages used in their *lectio divina* (sacred reading).

A PROCESS FOR SACRED READING

Liguori Publications has designed this study to be user friendly and manageable. However, group dynamics and leaders vary. We're not trying to keep the Holy Spirit from working in your midst, thus we suggest you decide beforehand which format works best for your group. If you have limited time, you could study the Bible as a group and save prayer and reflection for personal time.

However, if your group wishes to digest and feast on sacred Scripture through both prayer and study, we recommend you spend closer to ninety minutes each week by gathering to study and pray with Scripture. *Lectio divina* (see page 11) is an ancient contemplative prayer form that moves readers from the head to the heart in meeting the Lord. We strongly suggest using this prayer form whether in individual or group study. Below are two suggested formats:

GROUP-STUDY FORMATS

1. Bible Study

About one hour of group study

- ✧ Gathering and opening prayer (3 to 5 minutes)
- ✧ Read the Scripture passage aloud (5 minutes)
- ✧ Silently read the commentary and prepare to discuss it (3 to 5 minutes)
- ✧ Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflections (40 minutes)
- ✧ Closing prayer (3 to 5 minutes)

2. Bible Study With *lectio divina*

About ninety minutes of group study

- ✧ Gathering and opening prayer (3 to 5 minutes)

- ✠ Read the Scripture passage aloud for the first time (5 minutes)
- ✠ Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it (3 to 5 minutes)
- ✠ Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (30 minutes)
- ✠ Read the Scripture passage aloud a second time and allow some quiet time for meditation and contemplation (5 minutes)
- ✠ Spend time in prayer with the selected passage. Group participants will slowly read the Scripture passage a third time in silence, listening for the voice of God as they read. (10 to 20 minutes)
- ✠ Shared reflection (10 to 15 minutes)
- ✠ Closing prayer (3 to 5 minutes)

To become acquainted with lectio divina, see page 11.

Notes to the Leader

- ✘ Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ✘ Plan which sections will be covered each week of your Bible Study.
- ✘ Read the material in advance of each session.
- ✘ Establish written ground rules. (Example: We will not keep you longer than ninety minutes; don't dominate the sharing by arguing or debating, etc.)
- ✘ Meet in an appropriate and welcoming gathering space (church building, meeting room, house).
- ✘ Provide name tags and perhaps use a brief icebreaker for the first meeting; ask participants to introduce themselves.
- ✘ Mark the Scripture passage(s) that will be read during the session.
- ✘ Decide how you would like the Scripture to be read aloud (whether by one or multiple readers).
- ✘ Use a clock or watch.
- ✘ Provide extra Bibles (or copies of the Scripture passages) for participants who don't bring their Bible.
- ✘ Ask participants to read "Introduction: Letters to the Romans and Galatians" (page 21) before the first session.
- ✘ Tell participants which passages to study and urge them to read the passages and commentaries before the meeting.
- ✘ If you use the *lectio divina* format, familiarize yourself with this prayer form ahead of time.

Notes to Participants

- ✘ Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ✘ Read "Introduction: Letters to the Romans and Galatians" (page 21) before the first class.
- ✘ Read the Scripture passages and commentary before each session.
- ✘ Be prepared to share and listen respectfully. (This is not a time to debate beliefs or argue.)

Opening Prayer

Leader: O God, come to my assistance,

Response: O Lord, make haste to help me.

Leader: Glory be the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit...

Response: ...as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Leader: Christ is the vine and we are the branches. As branches linked to Jesus, the vine, we are called to recognize that the Scriptures are always being fulfilled in our lives. It is the living Word of God living on in us. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in us the fire of your divine wisdom, knowledge, and love.

Response: Open our minds and hearts as we study your great love for us as shown in the Bible.

Reader: (Open your Bible to the assigned Scripture(s) and read in a paced, deliberate manner. Pause for one minute, listening for that word, phrase, or image that you may use in your *lectio divina* practice.)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Let us pray as Jesus taught us.

Response: Our Father...

Leader: Lord, inspire us with your Spirit as we study your Word in the Bible. Be with us this day and every day as we strive to know you and serve you and to love as you love. We believe that through your goodness and love, the Spirit of the Lord is truly upon us. Allow the words of the Bible, your Word, to capture us and inspire us to live as you live and to love as you love.

Response: Amen.

Leader: May the divine assistance remain with us always.

Response: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



INTRODUCTION

Letters to the Romans and Galatians

Read this overview before the first class.

WHEN A SMALL Bible study group was discussing the letters of Paul the Apostle, a woman in the group named Carol told the story of how a letter from a person she had never met changed her life. Two years prior to receiving the letter, her three-year-old son was killed when he ran in front of a speeding car. A few months after the accident, her husband, who appeared to be in good health, awoke one morning, told her that he felt “strange,” and suddenly died of a heart attack. And just three months after her husband’s death, she became so depressed that she decided she would end her life quietly at home. The woman prepared a short note to her sister and left it on a desk in her house, telling her sister that life had become too lonely and difficult. The day she chose to die, she purchased several bottles of sleeping pills and planned on taking them at bedtime. But, on her way home from the pharmacy, she picked up her mail and found a letter from a nun she had never met.

In her letter, the nun wrote that a friend who knew Carol asked the nun to pray for her, explaining the tragedies Carol experienced. The nun further explained that she was praying one day when she suddenly felt a strong urge to write Carol a letter. In the letter, the nun encouraged her to be strong, stressing that Jesus suffered a great deal and was later raised from the dead. “Unfortunately,” the nun wrote, “many people stop at the death of Jesus and never enter into union with his resurrec-

tion.” She went on to stress that Jesus knows suffering, but Jesus also knows resurrection. The nun added that Carol’s son and husband were sharing in resurrection, and she noted that Carol had a different kind of resurrection to face at this time, namely a resurrection of spirit that would enable her to go on living for her lost family. The nun promised to continue to pray for Carol.

Carol told the study group that this letter opened her eyes to the foolishness of ending her life. She explained that the thoughts expressed in the letter helped her but—even more—the idea that a stranger would write to her with such love and concern touched her. The love expressed in it had such a deep effect on her that she sat and wept as she had never wept before. An hour later, she felt as though she had wept out all her bitterness and anger toward God and was ready to begin to live again. Due to this extraordinary event in Carol’s life, she immediately flushed the sleeping pills down the drain, tore up the letter to her sister, and began to clean her house, something she hadn’t done since her husband’s death.

A letter of encouragement can make a great difference in our lives. This was also true for early Christian communities.

The Letters of Paul

Although fourteen of the twenty-one letters found in the New Testament have been attributed to Paul, most scholars agree that some of them were not written by him but instead by his disciples who believed that they were writing in the spirit of Paul and remained faithful to his message. Seven of the letters that are widely accepted to have been written by Paul are Romans, Corinthians 1 and 2, Galatians, Philippians, Thessalonians 1, and Philemon. Scholars agree that Romans and Galatians, which we address in this book, were without a doubt authored by Paul. In this Catholic Bible study series, distinctions will be made between the letters written by Paul and those likely penned by another author that have been frequently attributed to Paul through the centuries.

Through his letters, Paul applied Jesus’ life and message to the Church.

He addressed issues that became dominant in the Church after Jesus' ascension. Each letter addresses particular issues and arguments within the community to whom he was writing. Though it was not Paul's intention to present a systematic theology, his writings do include a large number of theological insights that have greatly influenced the theology of the Church down to our present age.

In the New Testament, the letters of the Pauline corpus are assembled in descending order according to their length, ranging from Romans to Philemon (longest to shortest). Romans stands as one of the most significant of Paul's letters due to its length. This letter exhorts about God's righteousness and love that come to us through Jesus Christ. Like the nun in the opening story, Paul wrote his letters with love and concern for the communities to which he sent them. As the early Church often had conflicts arise, the letters helped these communities to work through divisions and act lovingly toward one another.

Paul's Conflict With Jewish Christians

The theme of Paul's Letters to the Romans and Galatians would come as no surprise to those who are familiar with Paul's mission to the Gentiles. If news reporters were to write about Paul today, they would call him an activist who was driven to dedicate himself totally to whatever cause he believed to be true and important. When we first meet Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, we encounter a totally energetic and dedicated Jew. He strongly believed that the followers of Jesus were contaminating Judaism. Like many pious Jews, he most likely thought that God would punish the Jews for allowing this new sect to flourish, so he dedicated himself to eradicating it—that is Christianity. Paul didn't wait for them to come to him or to the area where he lived; but rather, he went out of his way to find and persecute Christians. Nothing would stand in the way of what he believed to be important.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us that Paul was on a journey to Damascus with papers allowing him to arrest Christians and have them cast into jail. On his journey, a dazzling light blinded him and the voice of Christ

asked Paul why he was persecuting him. In this vision, Christ identified himself with Christians. But when the vision ended, Paul was blind and had to be led by hand to Damascus where he fasted for three days until a disciple named Ananias was sent by the Lord to baptize him.

Ananias announced that Paul was an instrument of the Lord to bring Christ's message to the Gentiles (9:1–19). As a result of this experience, Paul abandoned his persecution of Christians and directed his tireless and heroic energies toward spreading Christ's message. Paul could now say he no longer lived for himself but instead for Christ. His plight became one of great suffering for Christ, even to the point of dying in his efforts to share Jesus' message.

As Paul preached about Christ, he converted many from among the Gentiles. In his endeavors to bring the Gentiles to Christ, he recognized how difficult it was for them to follow the Jewish laws and practices, especially circumcision. Thus his mission to them eventually led him to fight for exemption from Jewish laws and practices for Gentile converts. This would prove to be a difficult task, since many Jewish converts to Christ believed that the Gentiles had to convert to Judaism in order to become disciples of Christ.

When Paul and Barnabas completed their first missionary journey, they traveled to Jerusalem for a meeting which some would identify as the Jerusalem Council, the first council of the Church. In the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that Barnabas is the disciple who welcomed Paul into the early community when others were uncertain about the sincerity of Paul's conversion. Barnabas trusted Paul and became a missionary to the Gentiles along with him. For this reason, Barnabas joined Paul in going to Jerusalem to meet with the Church leaders concerning the demands placed on the Gentile converts.

At the time when Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem, the Jewish followers of Jesus who believed that Jesus was the Christ were known as "the Way," a title used to signify the new way of living as a faithful Jew. The Jewish converts who accepted Jesus as the Christ expected many other Jews to eventually join them, believing that Judaism would now continue with the long-awaited Messiah. The rapid and unexpected spread

of faith in Christ among the Gentiles brought many Jewish Christians into conflict with Paul and Barnabas, who now had to travel to Jerusalem to plead the cause of the Gentile converts.

Leaders of “the Way” met with Paul and Barnabas to discuss the Gentile converts’ place among the followers of Christ. They brought exciting news to the council about the number of converts from among the Gentiles but had to address the practice of circumcision that was a stumbling block for the new converts. However, Paul eventually persuaded the Christian leaders in Jerusalem to allow the Gentiles to convert without adhering to the dictates of the Mosaic Law.

Acts of the Apostles sets the scene for a major conflict that hounded Paul during his missionary endeavors. We read: “Some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1). An apparently heated discussion took place at the council, but the verdict eventually was sent to the Christians at Antioch declaring: “It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities, namely to abstain from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage” (Acts 15:28). Circumcision was not mentioned as one of the necessities, thus freeing the Gentile converts from this practice.

As often happens after councils, there were some who refused to accept the decision of the Church council. Many Jewish Christians continued to preach that Gentiles had to be circumcised when they wished to become a Christian. These followers came to be known as Judaizers, a group of rigid Christian Jews who refused to abandon Mosaic Law and practices and attempted to impose them on new followers of Christ. Paul’s message about freedom from the Mosaic Law infuriated the Judaizers, so they often tried to undermine him and his teachings. Thus, they plagued Paul often during his missions to the point that he was no longer able to preach in their synagogues.

Paul himself continued to protest that his Jewish heritage and practices were sacred to him, but he also believed that the Mosaic Law had lost its force and should no longer be a condition for being a Christian.

Surprisingly, Paul's greatest enemies were not those who rejected Jesus as the Messiah but those who accepted that Jesus was the Messiah and who also believed that following the Mosaic Law was necessary for a true conversion. When Paul attempted to preach that circumcision and some practices of the Mosaic Law were no longer necessary to enforce for the Gentile Christians, he encountered rejection and persecution at the hands of Jewish Christians.

Romans and Galatians

Studying the Letters to the Romans and the Galatians in a single volume is a logical approach to understanding the meaning contained therein. Though Paul wrote both letters at a different time in his ministry and treats his audience differently, the themes found in both letters are similar to each other. For example, in both letters Paul writes about the pre-eminence of faith in Jesus over the works of the Israelite Law. Also, it is good to note that Paul's Letter to the Galatians comes later in our current biblical format, but it was actually written before his Letter to the Romans.

The conflict between Paul and the Judaizers became a central point for both of these letters. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul speaks more calmly than he does to Galatia. And while his letter to the church in Rome appears to be more like an essay than a letter, his Letter to the Galatians speaks more pointedly and harshly about faith and works. Due to these shared themes, the commentary and reflections for these two letters were compiled together in this volume of the *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* series.

The author of Acts of the Apostles tells us that the Jews at Jerusalem entice the authorities to arrest Paul. When Paul appeals to Rome, he is later sent as a prisoner in chains there. Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans before his journey to Jerusalem, and this took place more than two years before he was taken to Rome as a prisoner. He planned to go to Rome as a free man, but circumstances in Jerusalem led him to be brought to Rome in chains. It is believed that Paul was beheaded in Rome under the Christian persecution of Nero, around the year 64.

Authorship of Romans and Galatians

Because the Letter to the Romans clearly expresses Paul's ideology and style, no one has ever seriously doubted that he was indeed the author. Paul apparently had time to reflect on and plan carefully what he wished to say, as his Letter to the Romans is more peaceful, measured, and rational than his Letter to the Galatians. Although the message is similar to that of the Galatians, here he is writing to a Christian community founded by other missionaries. Most of the Roman Christians did not know Paul personally, although they may have heard about him. Thus, he likely wished to ingratiate himself with his audience, but at the same time he remained faithful to the theme that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ and not through works of the law.

Likewise, almost all commentators agree that Paul is certainly the author of the Letter to the Galatians. This letter has his strength of style and language, and it speaks with the authority of one who knows the members of the audience to whom he is writing. Ancient writers also state that Paul authored this letter.

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Some commentators refuse to place Romans under the heading of a "letter." They consider a letter to be a form of communication intended for a person or persons who are separated from each other, and not intended to be addressed to the general public. Paul's Letter to the Romans is more like an essay that presents Paul's theological and practical views in a more subdued and restrained manner than is found in some of his other letters. It is certainly his longest letter and most likely his last letter, at least among the letters known to be written by Paul.

The Roman Audience

With the exception of his epistle to the Christian community at Rome, Paul wrote all his letters to communities he founded. It is noteworthy that Paul never visited Rome until he was brought there in chains, but he learned about the faith and concerns of the community through reports

from others who had been there. This indicates he knew some Christians who were living in Rome when he wrote his letter. At the letter's end, he greets Prises and Aquila, whom he describes as "my co-workers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3). He also sends greetings to others who are living in Rome. The reality that he knew so many people likely indicates that a sizable number of Christians lived there.

Paul shows his concern for all Christians in his letter, including both those he never met along with those he knew. And he was fully aware of the problems and conflicts of the Christians in Rome. In his letter, he shares with them his insights about Christ and Christianity as they developed through his years of preaching about Jesus. Years later, when Paul was brought to Rome as a prisoner, many of these converts to Christianity greeted him there.

The situation among Christians in Rome came about through changing situations in Rome itself. The Jewish converts to Christ were most likely the original group who brought the message of Jesus to Rome. During the time of the apostles, there were Jewish converts to Christianity, and these converts believed strongly that those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah must also accept Jewish laws and rituals. Converts from among the Jews were not the only ones to follow Christ in the first century, as there were also many Gentiles who began to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

Bitter conflicts between Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and those who did not developed in Rome and peaked around the year 49. A Roman historian named Suetonius wrote that Emperor Claudius, as a result of this conflict among the Jews, issued an edict expelling all Jews from Rome. According to Suetonius, the Jews were all to be banished because of their relationship to a certain "Chrestus," which obviously pointed to Jesus Christ. Since the Romans could not distinguish between Jews who accepted Jesus as the Christ and those who did not, the edict affected them all.

Around the year 54, at the death of Claudius, Nero became emperor and allowed the Jews to return to Rome. With the return of the Jews to the city, a different type of conflict arose. The Gentiles spent more than four years free of the Jewish Christians who wanted to impose Jewish

laws and rituals on the Gentile converts to Christianity. A clash of belief took place as both sides remained adamant in resisting each other. The Gentile Christians not only refused to follow the Jewish laws and rituals, but they began to look down upon the Mosaic Law and saw it as unnecessary. So it was this conflict that Paul addressed in his Letter to the Romans.

Date of the Epistle

Although Paul's Letter to the Romans comes first in the canonical presentation of the New Testament letters, it is not the first letter written by Paul. Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans from Greece, likely Corinth, between the years 56 and 58 (see Acts 20:2–3). The dating of the epistle is based on circumstances found in the writing. As mentioned above, Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome around the year 49, but Paul sends greetings to two Jewish converts named Prisca and Aquila, who were expelled and returned after Nero became emperor.

Paul had long planned to move his mission further west to Spain, intending to stop at Rome on his journey. When he wrote to the Romans, he was about to go to Jerusalem with a collection for the Christians in the area who were struggling and in need of financial support. Throughout his missionary journeys among the Gentiles, Paul gathered contributions from Gentile converts. He hoped the collection would show the concern of the Gentile Christians for their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem and, at the same time, prove to the Jewish Christians there that he was faithful to the Jewish origins of faith in Jesus. He realized the dangers involved in his visit to Jerusalem, but he wanted to bring the collection to the Christians there himself rather than sending it with an envoy. The dangers he faced in Jerusalem eventually led to his imprisonment, as well as his later move to Rome in chains.

In Acts 20:3, we read that toward the end of his third missionary journey, with the collection ready to be brought to Jerusalem, Paul stopped in Greece for three months. Since Paul had a very successful mission at Corinth, he would most likely have stayed there. At the time, he was already preparing for another missionary journey after leaving

the collection in Jerusalem, a journey that seemed to include Rome and Spain. Dating the letter from Paul's journey to Jerusalem would place the writing of this epistle around the year 57.

Outline of Romans

The Human Condition

After a brief introduction in which Paul identifies himself and his mission, he describes the human condition as it existed without Christ. Paul exhorts Jews and Gentiles alike to abandon idolatry and serve the living God. The Jews, who had been given the Mosaic Law, are told that they will be judged according to it, while the Gentiles will be judged according to the law existing within themselves. For Jews and Gentiles alike, it is the interior spirit that counts. Paul declares that all are under the bondage of sin.

Faith in Christ

Justification comes to the Jews and Gentiles, not as a result of law or knowledge, but as a result of faith. It is a gift, freely given by God through Jesus Christ. Because God chose Abraham and his descendants before the Law came into being, Paul uses Abraham as an example of justification by faith. For the Christian, justification comes from God through Christ. Just as death came through the offense of Adam and affected all people, so the gift of salvation came through one man, Jesus Christ, for the sake of all. This gift, which is not earned by any of us, comes as a result of faith.

Through baptism the Christian dies to sin and rises to new life in union with Jesus Christ. Instead of living under the power and slavery to sin, the Christian now lives as a slave to justice. This new life brings with it a spirit of adoption that makes the Christian an heir with Christ. All creation, subject to futility and struggle because of sin, now has a new hope for glory. The love of God for all enables Paul to proclaim that nothing in the world can separate us from this love.

God's Faithfulness

Although some might think otherwise, God is always faithful to the promises made to Israel. Just as God chose Israel as the Chosen People, God continues to choose Christians to be “children of God” (Romans 8:14). The mercy of God extends to the Gentiles because of their strong faith. Thus, God chooses a remnant, along with the patriarchs of old (the root of the Israelite nation), who will consecrate the whole of Israel. In remaining faithful to the promises made in the past, God will show mercy to the Israelites who have not earned these gifts, but who, like the Gentiles, receive them as pure gifts from God.

Paul reminds Christians that they belong to the Body of Christ and that they do not live for themselves; instead they must offer themselves as a living sacrifice to God. Paul calls them to love one another and their enemies, for love fulfills the law. This love leads the Christian to avoid scandalizing the weak, even if this means abstaining from those things that are allowed under the law. Christians are to live a life of perfect harmony and acceptance of one another.

Paul concludes his Letter to the Romans with a message about his travel plans and a greeting to those residing in Rome.

Paul's Letter to the Galatians

A candidate in a political primary campaign wrote about a visit to members of a particular group of workers who had a strong influence on the way many other members of that group voted. When he laid out his plan for the future development of the area, he received wide and open acceptance from the workers. He believed he had more realistic goals to offer than his opponent, who was scheduled to speak to the workers three days later. As he left the meeting, the candidate told one of his aides that they had the workers' votes “sewed up.”

A week later, the candidate was shocked to read that the workers were leaning toward supporting his opponent in the primary. He called for an emergency meeting of his aides, angry that he had apparently lost the opportunity to convince the workers of the help he wished to offer them. In the space of only three days, his voters had been influenced to change

their stance in favor of his opponent. The aides advised the candidate to call the leader of these workers, express his surprise and disappointment, and offer to meet with him and the group once again to answer any questions or concerns that must have arisen during this time. Because this block of votes was so important, the candidate was willing to cancel all other engagements in the area to meet with them at their convenience.

The eventual outcome of this call was an invitation to have both candidates come to a meeting to respond to questions from the floor. The importance of these voters left the candidates with little choice but to accept the invitation. For the candidate who called for a second hearing, this proved to be a successful move, as he was able to answer objections from his opponent and show how he was prepared to respond to the needs of the workers. The group of workers eventually gave him their endorsement.

In a sense, Paul the Apostle was always on a spiritual campaign for Jesus Christ. He had discovered a valuable gift in the person and message of Jesus Christ, and he wanted the world to share this gift. This desire became the driving force of his life and led him through dangers and hardships that he might have otherwise avoided. When he left the people of Galatia, he could look back with joy on their acceptance of the gospel message. But he soon heard that the Galatians, in a very short time, had changed their hearts regarding the message; and, like the candidate in the story above, Paul immediately contacted them. He wanted to reclaim them for Christ and his message.

The Galatian Audience

Although we have no doubt about the author of the letter, we do have some doubt about the specific audience for whom the letter was written. Originally, the area called Galatia included the north-central section of Asia Minor. In 25 BCE, Rome incorporated Galatia into a Roman province, which became the province of Galatia. At that time, it added to the territory a section south of old Galatia; the province of Galatia now included places such as Pisidia, Lystra, and Derbe, all of which are mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles.

It is difficult to determine whether the letter was written to the old

Galatia to the north or to the area of Galatia that also included sections to the south. Although we can say that Paul wrote his letter to the people of Galatia, we cannot state with certainty the exact audience for whom the letter was intended. The difficulty in naming the exact audience of the letter leaves us with a further difficulty in trying to establish exactly when it was written. During his first missionary journey, Paul visited Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:14), located in the southern portion of Galatia. During his second and third missionary journeys, he visited an area named in the Book of Acts as Galatia (16:6; 18:23). This reference to Galatia in Acts refers to the northern area of the province, or old Galatia.

If Paul wrote to the churches founded during his first missionary journey, he would have been writing to those in the southern portion of the province. This would date his letter somewhere around the year 49. If, however, he wrote this letter to the areas he visited during his second and third missionary journeys, then we would have to date the letter around the year 54. All we can say with certainty is that Paul wrote his letter somewhere between these two dates.

Paul's Occasion to Write to Galatia

Paul addresses his letter to the people he had converted from paganism on one of his missionary journeys. He writes about justification by faith in Jesus and not by works of the law (Galatians 2:16). He also confronts those who were teaching that freedom in Christ meant freedom to do whatever they wanted, including actions that were previously considered sinful. Paul teaches about the value of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and that Christians were free from the burdens of the Mosaic Law.

When he established the church in Galatia, he taught the converts about the superiority of faith in Christ over the Law, but after he left, the people accepted a different gospel as presented by the later arrival of the Judaizers. The Judaizers preached that practices and rituals of the Mosaic Law, including circumcision, should be added to Paul's message about Christ. Therefore, they challenged Paul's authority as an apostle, stating that he was not a companion of Jesus and that his message was contrary to that of the original disciples of Jesus. They accused Paul of

not teaching the necessity of circumcision for salvation in Christ as well as other practices of the Mosaic Law.

Paul's aim in the letter was to lead the people back to his original teaching, which rejected the practice of the Mosaic Law and circumcision. His anger flared when he realized that the people he converted abandoned his message to follow the teachings of the Judaizers. This Letter to the church in Galatia has a tone of a parent who is rebuking and re-educating his or her children.

Outline of Galatians

Loyalty to the Gospel

Paul expresses his dismay that the Galatians have so easily abandoned the gospel he preached to them. He speaks boldly, asking if the people now think he is trying to gain favor with them or if he is speaking strongly for the sake of the gospel, no matter what they think about him.

Paul's Defense

Paul defends his teachings by reviewing his life before his conversion and showing that his teachings were approved by the church in Jerusalem. He declares that a person is justified, not by the Law of Moses, but by faith in Jesus.

Faith and Freedom

Paul becomes upset with the Galatians for their change of mind from the teachings he gave them. He taught them about the freedom from the Law of Moses which came with the fulfillment of the promise in the person of Jesus Christ. He warns his readers not to throw this freedom away.

Living as a Christian

Paul reminds his readers of the freedom which comes with faith in Christ. The freedom is not for impurity, but a freedom to live by the Spirit of God, avoiding every type of evil. Those who transgress should be cut off from the community for a period of time for the sake of their repentance. Paul writes the end of the letter in his own hand to prove that the words of the letter, which may be written by a scribe, are indeed his words.



LESSON 2

Justification Through Faith

ROMANS 2—5

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to the peace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God (5:1–2).

Opening Prayer (SEE PAGE 20)

Context

Part 1: Romans 2—3:20 Paul is confronting the antagonism between the Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity, explaining that both are bound by law, but a different kind of law. Whether Jews or Gentiles, those who judge the other must be tested by the same judgment that they cast on others. Jews and Gentiles alike experience affliction for evil acts or glory and peace for the good that they do. All will be judged by what they know and accept, whether or not they adhere to the Law of Moses. However, Jews and Gentiles alike are called to follow the law that is written on their hearts and within their conscience. Paul's exhortation does not intend to break the Mosaic Law, but it does free the Gentiles from learning all of the rights and rituals that the Jews have adhered to throughout their faith lives.

The Mosaic Law brings knowledge of sin. In reality, a Jew who breaks the Mosaic Law is acting as though he is not circumcised, and the Gentile who is keeping God's commands is acting as

though he is circumcised. The Jews have an advantage since they were entrusted with God's law. Regardless of tradition, however, sin entraps those bound by the law and those who know the law of God in their hearts.

Part 2: Romans 3:21—5 Paul teaches that the righteousness of God comes not from the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. Whether or not one follows the Mosaic Law, it is faith that justifies a person. Paul speaks of justification for both the circumcised and the uncircumcised and God's intent to justify us by faith. Before the Mosaic Law, the righteousness of God came through the faith of Abraham. Thus the promise made to Abraham was not just for those who adhere to the Law, but for all who follow the example of Abraham, our father in faith. Therefore, we can boast of our afflictions that lead us to hope and love in Christ who laid down his life for us. Just as through the transgression of one, death came into the world, so through the righteous act of one (Christ), life came for all.

PART 1: GROUP STUDY (ROMANS 2—3:20)

Read aloud Romans 2—3:20.

2:1–11 God's Just Judgment

After his diatribe against those who do not allow themselves to believe, Paul seems to contradict his teaching. He seems to be judging sinners in his previous passage, and now he lashes out at those who judge others, telling them that they have no excuse for doing so. He claims that they actually condemn themselves because they perform the very deeds that they judge to be evil. Paul is actually telling them that they should not look complacently on his previous message and hold themselves excused while they judge others. Instead, they should test themselves against Paul's words. Paul does not perceive that he is judging others but that he is setting norms for judgment.

Although Paul does not name those who bear the name “Jew” as the targets of his words, he is actually addressing the Jews who believe that they, unlike the Gentiles, know the true God and the Mosaic Law. Later in this chapter, he will refer to those who call themselves Jews, but here he seems to be addressing the same people. The Jews would naturally agree with Paul’s condemnation of idolatry, but Paul sees the rejection of Jesus Christ as a type of idolatry and so has a warning for his Jewish audience. The Jews will not only be accused of worshiping idols in the same manner as the pagans, but they will also be condemned for committing the sin of presuming that the goodness and patience of God will save them. Paul tells them that the kindness of God is an invitation to repentance.

Paul continues with his warning for his Jewish audience. He warns that just as the Jews of the past hardened their hearts against God (as in the Exodus), so now they are hardening their hearts against the gospel. When Moses led the people through the desert during the Exodus, the people became thirsty and rebelled against Moses, showing that they lacked trust in God. Their rebellion was considered a hardening of their hearts (Exodus 17:1–7). Paul tells the Jews of his own era that they must face God with their failings on the day of wrath, that is, the day of just judgment, when all will be understood clearly. On that day of judgment, all people, Jews as well as Gentiles, will receive a reward or punishment. Just as Paul acknowledged in the previous chapter of this letter that he was sent first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, so he now states that the reward and punishment will be given out to all, first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. Whether first or last, the Jews and the Gentiles who respond to God’s loving justice will receive the same reward, while those who do not respond will receive the same punishment. Paul significantly states that God shows no partiality.

2:12–16 Judgment by the Interior Law

Paul teaches that God will judge all sinners within the framework of their knowledge of what is good or evil, and he contends that Jews and Gentiles alike have some knowledge of good and evil. Gentiles, who do not know the Mosaic Law, will be judged by their own interior call to live

a good life, while the Jews, who have the Mosaic Law, will be judged according to that Law. Those who sin without knowing the Mosaic Law will perish without being judged by the Mosaic Law, and those who sin with knowledge of the Law will perish according to the demands of the Law. Possession of the Law by the Jews is not enough to be righteous in God's eyes, but those who obey the Law will be justified. When the Gentiles who do not know the Mosaic Law observe the Law in their hearts as they know it, they are living according to the prescriptions of the Law. Just as Paul declared earlier that one can know about God from a reflection on creation, so he now states that one can know the demands of the law written in a person's heart. Gentiles must follow the judgment of their conscience to tell them whether they are living in accordance with this inner law. On the day of judgment, their conscience will accuse or excuse them before God. On that day, judgment will come from God through Jesus Christ who knows the deep secrets of the heart.

2:17–29 Judgment by Mosaic Law

Although Paul has been addressing the Jews throughout this chapter, he names them as his audience for the first time in this passage. Confronting them, he uses the diatribe style found in his letter and addresses an imaginary audience without naming any individuals. He begins with the words, "Now if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of God" (2:17). Here he is writing to the Jews who pride themselves on their knowledge of the Law and their call as the People of God, which is the foundation of their reason for boasting. They believe they have insight into God's will that others lack. Besides this supposed knowledge of God's will, they also believe they are able to make profound and correct judgments about the manner of living close to God. Because of their knowledge of the Law, they believe they can help the blind and become a light for those in darkness. Their knowledge of the Law leads them to believe they can teach the foolish and the simple.

After listing reasons for foolish pride and boasting, Paul confronts the Jews about their refusal to teach themselves. He asks those who teach others not to steal if they are stealing. For those who forbid adultery,

Paul asks if they are committing adultery. He asks if those who detest idols do not rob temples, implying that they are acting for their own gain. Although the Jews abhorred pagan temples, they were cautious about disgracing any of the temples. He challenges them as protectors of law to judge whether they are dishonoring the law of God by breaking it. Paul quotes from Isaiah (52:5) to show the Jews the evil they have done. In this quote, Isaiah tells the people how they have blasphemed God's name among the Gentiles by their actions.

Paul continues to challenge his audience by confronting those who believe they have fulfilled the Law by living out its rituals. Some of the Jews accepted circumcision without carrying out other demands of the Law, which makes Paul accuse them as living in the same manner as uncircumcised people. Jeremiah, an Old Testament prophet, urged the people to return to the Lord by circumcising their hearts as well as their bodies. He writes, "Be circumcised for the Lord, remove the foreskins of your hearts" (Jeremiah 4:4). In this passage Jeremiah taught that physical circumcision does not necessarily lead one to live as though he is dedicated to the Lord.

Paul returns to the importance of living out the spirit of the Law rather than the external precepts alone. He tells his listeners that the uncircumcised, who keep the inner law of their hearts, pass judgment on those circumcised Jews who do not live according to the Law. Following the insights of Jeremiah, Paul reminds his audience that true circumcision is not a mark found on the flesh but one that is found in the heart. It is not the letter of the law that matters.

When we read about Paul's attack on those who live according to the letter of the Law and not its spirit, we must be careful not to think that he is opposed to Jews. Paul cares deeply for his Jewish brothers and sisters, and he knows that many of them lived faithfully according to the precepts of the Mosaic Law. Because of his love for the Mosaic Law, Paul feels a need to lash out at those who have made a mockery of the Law. This passage ends by stating that it is the spirit, not the letter of the Law that is important. Others will not always favorably accept those who live this message. The Romans are told that they may not

receive praise from any human source. In writing to the Romans, Paul is teaching that human praise is not important, but that one should rather seek praise from God.

3:1–8 Advantages of Being a Jew

Paul continues his imaginary debate by anticipating some objections to his statements about the Gentiles and Jews. After all he has said, one could infer that there was no advantage to being a Jew or to being circumcised. Paul, who was a good Jew himself and who cherished his Jewish roots, believed that God chose the people of Israel and the ancestors of Abraham as the foundation of God's promise to Israel. This was the case even though Paul himself preached about Christ and freedom from the Mosaic Law for Gentiles. When he was writing his letter to the Romans, Paul reached the point where he believed that the true descendants of Abraham were not those who followed him in the flesh (that is, not those bound to him by physical generation and circumcision), but those who followed the example and faith of Abraham.

In this passage of his Letter to the Romans, Paul begins to list the advantages of belonging to the Chosen People, but he names only the first advantage before becoming distracted by the example he uses. He states that the Jews received the great privilege of being entrusted with the Word of God, the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul digresses at this point and does not list any further advantages until he discusses them in a different context in Chapter 9 of this letter. Instead, he notes that God will not abandon God's covenant because of the unfaithfulness of some. Some Jews believed that a covenant existed only as long as both parties remained faithful to it, but the covenant made with God continues to exist because of God's faithfulness. Paul first asks if the covenant with God ceases because some Jews are unbelievers. Unlike many Jews, Paul does not accept the idea that a covenant ceases when one party breaks the covenant, and he adds that God will always be true to the covenant, no matter what others might do. Paul quotes from an Old Testament Psalm (116:11), which says that God will be proven true in the end, even if all people are liars.

Paul poses another question concerning the right of God to punish sinners. Some would contend that since a sinful person proves the justice of God by sinning, then God should not punish the sinful person. Without sin, we would never know of the justice of God. Paul answers that God's justice can only be shown in judgment. If we take judgment away from God, we can know nothing about God's justice. He notes that some might claim foolishly that the sinner actually points out the goodness of God and that sin can be a way of glorifying God. Some have apparently accused Paul of teaching this foolish message, and he strongly condemns them.

3:9–20 Universal Bondage of Sin

Paul questions whether the Jews have an advantage over others and then goes on to answer his own question by stating that the Jews are not better off, because Jews and Greeks alike are under the dominion of sin. For Paul and the people of his day, sin has a powerful grip on creation. Paul makes his point even more forceful by quoting from a series of Old Testament statements about the human condition. Besides the list of sins used in preaching in Paul's time, the preachers also used lists of quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures in order to emphasize a particular point. The list used here by Paul was most likely from one of these preset lists. In choosing this particular list of quotations from the Book of Psalms (14:1–3; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; 36:1; and from Isaiah 59:7–8), Paul underlines the people's rejection of God. In short, the quotations tell us that no one is just and that all have gone in the wrong direction, unconcerned about a true search for God. Their mouths, like the tombs of the decaying dead, are the source of lies, curses, and bitterness. They run after evil and bloodshed and refuse to walk the path of peace. They lack a true fear of God. The image presented is of a person who completely lacks any form of righteousness. And the law applies to both Jews and Gentiles. The purpose of the Law is not to bring justification, but to enable a person to know what is sinful. The Jews who were familiar with the Scripture quotations used by Paul would have applied them to the Gentiles, but Paul applies them to all people.

Paul returns to the central theme of the letter by declaring that observance of the Law does not lead to justification. This can come only from God. The Law is simply a guide to help a person know what is sinful.

Review Questions

1. How would you apply Paul's warning about judging in the second chapter of Romans (2:1–11) to our own day?
2. In what way does the discussion about the law within our hearts in Romans (2:12–16) help us apply the message of Jesus to our life today?
3. How do you apply Paul's strong words on circumcision in Romans (2:17–29) to baptism?
4. Do you think that we need evil in the world to understand what is good? Explain.

Closing Prayer (SEE PAGE 20)

Pray the closing prayer now or after *lectio divina*.

Lectio Divina (SEE PAGE 11)

Relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

The meditations that follow are provided only to help group participants use this prayer form, but note that *lectio* is intended to bring one to a place of prayerful contemplation where the Word of God speaks to the hearer from his or her heart. See page 11 for further instruction.

God's Just Judgment (2:1–11)

By warning the Jews against judging others, Paul is warning all people who consider themselves deserving of God's love. Some know the law and seem to be favored by God, but this neither frees them from practicing it nor does it give them the right to judge others. Whether knowledge of God's law comes through a revelation from God or through creation alone,

everyone must act in a just manner before God. God shows no partiality. Whether people are first or last, the good will be rewarded and the evil will be condemned. Paul believes that God loves everyone equally.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Judgment by Interior Law (2:12–16)

For Paul, there is the law written in the Mosaic Law and the law within people that directs them to know good from evil. Christian law follows the command of Jesus that directs us to love the Lord our God with our whole person, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Once we accept this law, all our actions are judged by it. Jesus quoted from the Old Testament in giving us this law, which means that the Mosaic Law already contained this call to total love of God and neighbor. Whether a person is a Jew who is bound by the Mosaic Law or is not a Jew and is bound by the law of Christ, all law boils down to love of God, neighbor, and a proper love of oneself. In accord with this law of love, Jews and Christians alike will be judged.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Judgment by the Mosaic Law (2:17–29)

Paul's message has an application to all people of faith. He warns the Jews that they must not only know and teach the Law, but they must live it in their hearts. We, too, know what God asks of us as taught through Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul's warning falls on us as well. Knowing Jesus' law and externally living all the precepts and rituals of Christ's law is not enough. We must ask ourselves how Jesus' law permeates our whole existence, including our thinking, judging, forgiving, and acting. This is what Paul asks of the Jews, and he is indirectly asking the same of us. In Paul's Letter to the Romans, he offers a challenge to all who profess faith in Jesus and his message.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Advantages of Being a Jew (3:1–8)

Paul teaches that knowledge of God's law is a gift from God. Since it comes from God, it helps a person to know how to love God according to the Lord's designs. Paul draws his conclusions about God and covenant by basing them on his understanding of God's love. He teaches that God remains faithful to the covenant, even when others sin against it. He addresses those who say that God allows evil to help us understand goodness by noting the foolishness in this line of reasoning. He responds to this line of thinking by reminding them of God's love, explaining that God would never allow evil to exist just so people might recognize goodness. However, God's love shines on the good as well as those who are evil.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Universal Bondage of Sin (3:9–20)

Our aim in life is to love God. While it can be an advantage to have a law that identifies sinfulness, living by the letter of the law does not keep a person from sin. Viewed from this vantage point, it is the spirit of a person or the inner desire to live in harmony with God that aids a person to follow God's will. When we view the Law for the Jews and the inner law of creation for Gentiles from the angle of loving God, the judgment of God is important. God judges us with love, and we have the call to respond with love. This radical love always concerns the dedication of our heart, and not merely the external observance of the Law.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

PART 2: INDIVIDUAL STUDY (ROMANS 3:21—5)

Day 1: Justification Apart From the Law (3:21–31)

In the previous passage, Paul noted the powerful grip of sin on the world, and he now offers a way to break this grip. He speaks of the “righteousness of God,” which refers to an activity on the part of God whereby a right relationship is established between God and creation. Although the Law (Torah) and prophets have pointed to this righteousness, it does not depend on them. This righteousness of God, which sets all things right between God and creation, comes from faith in Jesus Christ. It is a gift freely given to all believers.

Because all people, Jews as well as Gentiles, are under the power of sinfulness, they are deprived of a share in the glory of God. Through faith in Jesus Christ, however, all share in the justice of God, not because they have earned it, but because God freely gives it to them. No one deserves or is owed this gift.

Through the ministry of Jesus Christ, redemption comes to all who are under the power of sin. This redemption does not imply that the sinner is bought back from someone, as though Satan owned the sinner. It implies that the sinner moves from one state (sinfulness) to another (freedom from the power of sin). This redemption is brought about by the shedding of Jesus’ blood on the cross, and it expiates the sins of all believers. In this way, the justice of God becomes known to all, doing away with all sins committed in the past and patiently showing God’s justice in the present.

Because justification is a gift from God that cannot be earned, no one has a right to boast about being justified. It comes not from any good works, but rather from faith in Jesus Christ. Because the Jews believe there is only one God, they must admit that it is the same God who justifies the Jews as well as the Gentiles. Paul declares that he does not mean to say that the Law should be done away with; rather he is saying that the Law fulfills its true purpose—the justice of God at work.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

The justice of God, which consists of a right relationship with God, overcomes the power of sin in the world. Jesus confronted sin and all its worldly power, and in his resurrection, he conquered the power of sin, as sin had no other weapon beyond death. Through the conquest of the power of sin, God established a harmony between God and creation. Since this is a gift that no one can earn through good works, it comes to us through the power of faith. Even when we perform our good deeds, God's response to those deeds is still a gift. We cannot claim that God owes us the gift, but we can recognize in faith that God freely gifts us with salvation.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 2: Abraham Justified by Faith (4:1–12)

Paul draws an example from the life of Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation. He declares that Abraham would have reason to boast if he could prove that his good deeds earned him his special blessing from God. Paul refers to a line in Genesis that states, "Abram put his faith in the LORD, who attributed it to him as an act of righteousness." (Genesis 15:6). Although Abraham himself did nothing to deserve this right relationship with God, God "credited" this justice to him because of his belief.

Paul develops his message by comparing the wages a worker deserves because of the work he has performed with the gift received by one who does nothing. When a person does nothing except believe in the one who establishes the right relationship with humans, then the gift this person receives must be credited strictly as justice and not as a just wage. Paul believes (as did the people of his own day) that David was the author of all the Psalms. To underline his message, Paul quotes from a psalm in which David commends the person of faith who is justified by God (32:1–2). Thus, God levies no guilt on a person whose sins are "covered."

Paul continues his argument by asserting that Abraham was justified before his circumcision, that is, before he began to follow the Law.

It was almost thirty years after this call by God that Abraham received his circumcision. Paul sees circumcision as a sign of justification already received, rather than as a cause of justification. Because he was justified before his circumcision, Paul declares that Abraham proves that justification comes through faith. Abraham was the father of the uncircumcised as well as the circumcised and the one who gave a living example to all.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

Abraham's early commitment to God followed no external commands that he had to follow. Abraham existed before the Mosaic Law. But it was his faith that led God to reward him. Since Abraham lived by faith and not by the Law, his life showed the justification and love of God. It was God who acted on Abraham, not Abraham who performed acts in accord with the Law in order to please God. God is as active in our life as God was in the life of Abraham. God's justification of our lives does not depend on our actions alone, but on the living faith that guides our actions. True faith will always lead us to act with love toward God, and God will always respond with love.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 3: Inheritance Through Faith (4:13–25)

Paul emphasizes the point that the promise made to Abraham and passed on to his descendants—the promise that they would inherit the world—did not depend upon the Law. If this were so, then there would be no meaning to faith, or to the promise, because the promise would then depend on the activities of human beings. Because God's promise is based on faith, it includes all people, as the Scriptures proclaim (Genesis 22:17–18, 15:5).

Abraham believed that God gave life to the dead and birth to those not yet born. Paul tells us of the unflinching faith of Abraham, who believed in God and became the father of many nations. Paul conveniently omits

Abraham's laughter and hesitation at the news that he was to be the father of a child in his old age (Genesis 17:17). The dead to whom God gives life refers to the aged bodies of Abraham and of Sarah. Because God controls death and birth, God is able to bring to life the reproductive abilities of Abraham and Sarah, thus producing a new life. Paul repeats his message for the sake of emphasis. It was because of the faith of Abraham that he was justified.

Just as Abraham's faith led him to believe that God could bring a child forth from an aged man and a barren woman, so the faith of Christians leads them to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. Christians, by believing that Jesus died for their sins and was raised for their justification, share in this true relationship, which is called the justice of God.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

Abraham's faith led to the promise God made to him and his descendants. The same faith that led Abraham to believe that God could bring life to a barren womb leads Christians to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. Christians believe in the possibility of a right and harmonious relationship with God resulting from the death and resurrection of Jesus. The faith of each Christian flourishes as a result of the love God has shown in Jesus' resurrection, a faith that is not merited but given freely by God.

✧ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 4: Life in God (5:1–11)

Because of justification by faith, Paul declares that we are now at peace with God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. To the Hebrews, the word peace included a number of gifts, including contentment, harmony with God, and joy. Through Jesus Christ, the believer now stands before God with a new relationship (grace).

Paul here finds three reasons for boasting. The idea of such boasting is not to brag about oneself, but to expound on the wonders that come

from the goodness of God. His first boast looks to the hope we all have in sharing in the glory of God. His second boast, strangely enough, looks toward the suffering we must endure. The boasting is not done to express a sadistic approach to life, but instead to look beyond the suffering to the results that come from enduring it patiently. Through the virtue that comes from patiently enduring suffering, the Christian has reason to hope. Because God's love has already come to us through the Holy Spirit, such hope will not leave us disappointed. Again this love that comes from God is not earned, but freely given.

While we were still under the power of sin, Christ died for us. Paul recognizes the difficulty in dying, even if it be for a friend. That Jesus would die for us while we were still sinners proves the depth of his love for us. If Jesus died for us when we were such terrible sinners, how much more will he save us now that we have been reconciled with God through his death? Paul boasts this third time with the assurance of boasting not in his own name, but in the name of Jesus Christ. He boasts about God with whom we have all been reconciled.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

Paul changes the idea of boasting. He boasts, not because of something he had done, but because of what God has done. Christ brings us peace, which is contentment, harmony with God, and joy in the Lord. First, Paul boasts about the wonders of God's blessings bestowed on us. His second boast is about God's great love, which led Christ to suffer for us. The Christian can look beyond the suffering of Christ and realize the outstanding love of Christ who died. In turn, this fills us with hope and leads us to the virtue of enduring suffering. The third reason for boasting is that Christ has reconciled us with God. Paul realizes the foolishness of boasting about a holiness that neglects the reality that God's love for us is the real reason for boasting.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 5: Grace and Life through Christ (5:12–21)

In this passage, Paul contrasts the results of Adam's sin with the gift that comes from Jesus Christ. Through one person's sin, many died. Death in this sense refers to spiritual death in sin. Because all people sinned, all fell under the power of this spiritual death. Although the law that helped a person identify sin did not yet exist, sin did exist in the world. Paul tells us that this sin of the people was not in violation of a precept, such as that committed by Adam, but sin still prevailed.

Paul contrasts the gift that came through Jesus Christ with the effects of the sin committed through the one man, Adam. The gift of Jesus far surpassed the offense of Adam. Condemnation followed the single offense of Adam, whereas justification through Christ came after many offenses. Whereas death resulted from the sin of Adam, the far greater gift of justification came through the one man, Jesus Christ. In summary, Paul contrasts the condemnation that comes through the disobedience of Adam with the justification that comes through the obedience of Jesus Christ.

Paul tells us that the Law increased sin because people were able to identify their sinful actions as a result of knowing the Law. On the other hand, those who can clearly identify sin are more capable of understanding the extent of God's gift given through Jesus Christ. Where sin abounded, the grace that came through Jesus Christ far surpassed it.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

Paul helps us understand the extent of God's love for us by contrasting the sin of the first human being with the love of God that brought us justification through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Justification leads to a loving harmony with God, but this was gained at a great price. Knowledge of what is sinful can lead us to recognize sin in the world, but it also enables us to understand God's great love involved in freeing us from sin. Harmony with God is freely given from the Lord. Once we

realize this, we have the call to respond to such love by avoiding sin at all costs.

✧ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Review Questions

1. Why do Catholics refuse to believe that faith alone is all we need for salvation, regardless of what works we perform, whether good or evil?
2. How does Paul consider each of us to be an offspring of Abraham?
3. In what way does our sinfulness prove how much God loves us?
4. What does Paul mean when he says in Romans that “through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous” (5:19)? Discuss.