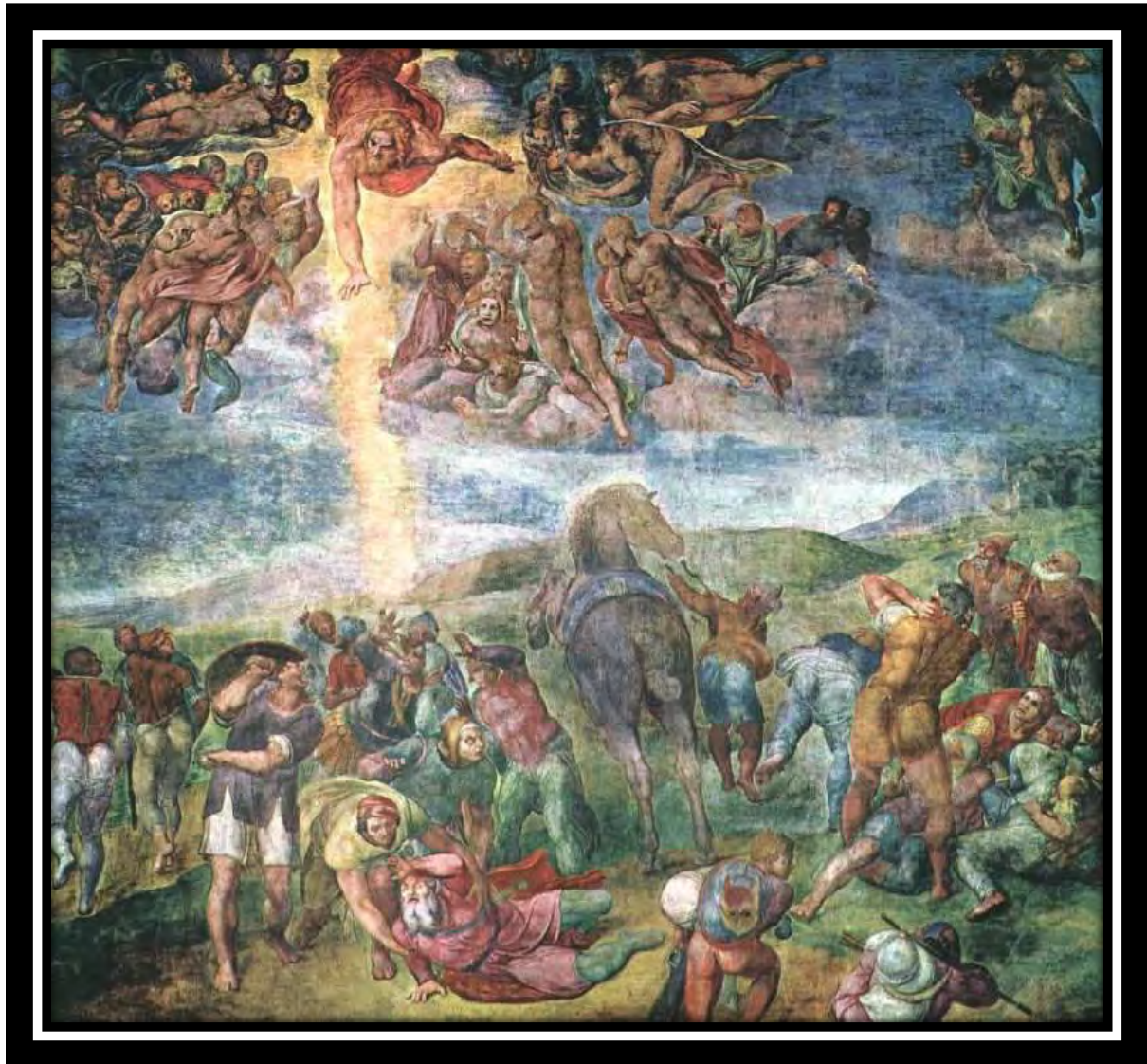


ROMANS—WEEK 8

JUSTICE AND MERCY



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Paul wears his heart on his sleeve in this section. Besides the trials his fellow Christians are facing, he sees his fellow Jews failing to be saved. This weighs on him so much he wants to trade places with them.

Most importantly, in a great logical treatise, Paul reconciles justice, mercy, and responsibility.

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Romans, Week 8 — Justice and Mercy
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1 Romans 8:31–39 (ESV)

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans is rich, but if you've been wondering, "Is this going somewhere?" this is where. Everything Paul has been teaching is for a specific purpose—to steel folks for the trials ahead. It's been fun and interesting, but Christianity isn't all about fun and interesting; it's about God's glory. Paul needs his readers (especially his original readers) to get ready to endure great trials.

The things Paul lists in the first paragraph are the things Christians should expect. Many will *be against us*. Some will *bring any charge against God's elect*. Others will *condemn us*. Something will try to *separate us from the love of Christ*. It might be *tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword*.

For each of these, Paul has a ready answer. God has our backs. *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

All the theological understanding in the world isn't worth a dime if it we don't use it. Trials and tribulations are no one's desire but they do give us a chance to use what we've learned.

That's when we experience God having our back (see Romans 5:3–5).

While most of us don't suffer the kind of persecution most people think of as real persecution, take another look at the list Paul lays out. Many are *against us*. Some do *bring any charge against God's elect*. Folks do *condemn us*.

But, most importantly, plenty of things try to *separate us from the love of Christ*. The modern things may even be more effective than the in-your-face persecution that the first century Christians had to endure. Their persecution was severe but at least it didn't masquerade as something else. Anti-Christian messages weren't hidden inside movies and TV shows. The news wasn't slanted.

Our persecution yields emotional rather than physical pain, but God has our backs just the same.

2 Romans 9:1–13 (ESV)

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

One of the great things about Paul’s writing is the way he wears his heart on his sleeve. He loves his countrymen and their rejection of Christ breaks his heart.

Remember, Paul had been in the middle of waging war against Christianity when the Lord jumped in and saved him. Jesus could have smacked him half-way across the galaxy, but instead chose to give Paul a dramatic, yet loving, wake-up call.

The irony of this weighs on Paul. That’s why he says, *“I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers.”* Paul is so rattled by God saving him but not many of his kinsmen that he wants to trade places with them.

The second paragraph has a “thinking out loud” feel to it, as if Paul is trying to reconcile all this in his own mind and is just talking it through. These things always seem to boil down to God’s sovereignty, and Paul highlights that with one of the toughest lines in scripture—*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*. This line appears twice (in Malachi 1:2–3 and Romans 9:13) so it must be important. Sure, it’s God’s universe and He can do anything he wants with it, but that still leads to some troubling questions.

Fortunately, Paul is going to tackle that next.

One of the keys to understanding scripture is facing up to the hard questions. If something troubles you, latch onto it. Let it trouble you. Don’t let go until it’s resolved. Attack it. Study it. Ask you pastor about it. You may learn things beyond your wildest dreams.

But know also that some things will remain unresolved. They may trouble you for years—or for life.

3 Romans 9:14–18 (ESV)

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

This passage makes two critical points. First, it's all about mercy and compassion. Everyone deserves condemnation.

If God saves anyone, it's either mercy or compassion. Thus, there can't be any *injustice on God's part*. Injustice would be condemning the innocent. That's not possible here.

Second, using Pharaoh as an example, Paul points out that everything that happens is according to God's plan. God even *raised up* Pharaoh for the purpose that His *name might be proclaimed in all the earth*.

And notice how this plays out at the end of this passage. It's not mercy vs. condemnation; it's *mercy vs. hardens*. This recalls how the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart before Moses.

But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go. — Exodus 10:27 (ESV)

This displays a magnificent and complex interplay between God's sovereignty and justice. God foreordains the means as well as the ends. This parallels how Paul described the law as making sin "*exceedingly sinful*."

But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. — Romans 7:13b (NKJV)

As we explained previously, this sentence contains two purpose constructions. God's purpose there was like putting a magnifying glass on sin. That seems to be the point with Pharaoh too.

This is both wonderous and troubling. God makes a point of accentuating the separation between the saved and the unsaved. He wants hardened people to be super hard, sin to be super sinful.

This reveals an agenda we rarely talk about—clarity. God leaves no room for doubt.

So, the LORD makes sure that those He condemns are clearly worthy of condemnation.

But there's a problem; God made them worthy of that condemnation. Doesn't that make Him ultimately responsible for their actions?

This takes us to what I consider to be the high point of Romans—tomorrow.

4 Romans 9:19–26 (ESV)

You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea,

“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”

“And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

What troubles people about this passage is that we are much more than lumps of clay. Justice for a lump of clay isn’t necessarily justice for a person. To put it another way, a lump of clay doesn’t need justice. Whatever the potter wants to do with his clay is OK by me.

We are much more than lumps of clay, but God is also much more than a potter. The analogy still holds.

But that’s still unsatisfying. It doesn’t settle the issues of responsibility and justice. God’s priorities are such that his being unjust would be allowable, but that’s not what the Bible says. The Bible says God is just.

He is just, but the explanation is long and complicated. It involves how responsibility for the same thing can exist simultaneously on multiple levels.

I treat this at length in a series on justice and predestination here:

<https://www.ailbe.org/columns/thedeep/item/15342-justice>

<https://www.ailbe.org/columns/thedeep/item/15343-justice-part-2>

<https://www.ailbe.org/columns/thedeep/item/15344-justice-part-3>

However, this gives rise to another important question.

As created beings, how can we be important to God. Specifically, how can we be important enough for the sacrifice of the cross? For that we sing, “Tis mystery all, the immortal dies.”

People often “love” the things they create, but not like this.

Praise God for His unimaginably great love.

5 Romans 9:27–29 (ESV)

And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.” And as Isaiah predicted,

*“If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,
we would have been like Sodom
and become like Gomorrah.”*

There’s no getting around it; this passage says something troubling. God’s design of salvation is for only a small remnant to be saved. Here are the quotes from Isaiah that Paul references:

*If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we should have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah. — Isaiah 1:9 (ESV)*

For though your people Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. For the Lord GOD of hosts will make a full end, as decreed, in the midst of all the earth. — Isaiah 10:22–23 (ESV)

This seems to contradict the great commission. Are we to go to great lengths to take the gospel to everyone, only to see only a small remnant actually come to Christ?

Yes, there’s no denying it. That’s frustrating and seems inefficient, but that just means efficiency isn’t the point. But how does this glorify God?

Well, lots of things are glorious *because* they have a low success rate. In bowling, a 300 game is rare. In golf, a hole in one is rare. Frankly, God saving anyone is glorious, and the way He did it is even more glorious. If He chooses to save everyone, or just a few, it’s His call.

I’m just happy to be part of that plan and grateful that He published an instruction book, since how it all fits together is above my pay grade.

The big takeaway here is to not be discouraged when we fail to get someone to accept the gospel. That’s normal and we may need to just move on. The biblical concept of shaking the dust off our feet probably doesn’t apply anymore, but we shouldn’t obsess over a failure in this area.

But if this involves someone you love, it’s different. There are plenty of examples where longsuffering patience has been rewarded, but the key word there is patience. Being in a rush can be counterproductive. Remember, God controls the timetable. He also controls who’s on the team.

Your desire is for them to be saved, not to be the one who leads them to Christ.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What aspect of life in America “tries” Christians most?
2. What's the toughest question in theology?
3. Do you feel sorry for Pharaoh?
4. Do you "expect" God to love you?
5. What's the slowest answer to prayer you've seen?

Items for prayer: