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Today we begin a journey through a book of the Bible that lays out the foundational principles of the Christian faith. All 66 books of the Bible are God-breathed and useful for doctrine, teaching, correcting and training in righteousness. We need to be reading them all, but there are some books we have to nail down and, for the believer, Paul’s letter to the Romans is one of those books.

A servant of Jesus Christ

The word servant is the Greek word “doulos.” Circle that word in your Bible. Sometimes the word is translated “bond-servant.” It describes a person owned by another. In the Old Testament the equivalent Hebrew word describes a person who loved his master so much that he committed himself to his master for life (Exodus 21:2-6). Paul was sold out to Jesus Christ…are we?

The word designated . . . one who was bound to his master in cords so strong that only death could break them, one who served his master to the disregard of his own interests, one whose will was swallowed up in the will of his master.¹

This term is one that should describe all believers. How are you doing as a doulos of Christ? Are you committed to him in cords so strong that only death could break them? Are you serving Jesus with disregard to your own interests? Are you swallowed up in the will of the master? Many people play around in their relationship to Jesus the way a scoundrel husband plays around on his wife.

Called to be an Apostle

In the original Greek the description is simply a “called Apostle.”

The word apostle means “one sent with authority,” but it became the title of the Twelve Disciples we are introduced to in the Gospels. To be an Apostle, a person had to have these special things happen in his life:

• Witness to the Resurrection (Acts 1:21-22)
• Called by Christ (Acts 1:21-22)
• Authority to work miracles (2 Corinthians 12:12)
• Power to impart spiritual gifts to others (1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Corinthians 10:8)

Paul, of course, was not one of the original disciples. Paul was born in Tarsus, one of the cultural centers of the Roman world, and grew up in a strict Jewish home. He was educated in Jerusalem and his teacher, Gamaliel, was one of the most distinguished teachers in Israel’s history. Paul was not just a good student, he excelled.

*I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.*
Galatians 1:14

Paul was a Pharisee and, in his zealousness for Judaism, he hated Christians. He saw the church as a threat to his faith—so similar and yet so different. So, in Acts 7, it is Paul who oversaw the stoning of Stephen—the first Christian martyr.

Paul had a personal encounter with the Risen Lord and he was called to be an Apostle—as one, he said, untimely born.
Paul headed to Arabia and spent three years studying the Scriptures and learning through the ministry of the Holy Spirit that the Messiah of the Old Testament was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Then Paul went to Syria and Cilicia to preach the Gospel among the non-Jews. Then, 14 years later, he returned to Jerusalem, this time to meet with the Apostles and let them know the story of God’s calling on his life.

The writer of Romans is a person steeped in the Old Testament and sold out to Jesus. We will see in this booklet how Paul brings the Old Testament and New Testament together.

On a very personal level, Paul’s conversion and calling teaches us some important lessons.

• **God can save me!**

  Paul was a man out to destroy the church and put Christians to death. And yet God, in his great grace, reached down to save him. We see in Paul that God can save the greatest sinner.

• **God can use me!**

  God’s grace is enough not only to bring us to himself but allow us to be a light for him. Paul is not unique in God’s use of great sinners. God can use you.

  Even though he persecuted the church, Paul could say in Galatians 1:15 that God set him apart from his mother’s womb. Amazingly, God used every aspect of Paul’s upbringing and strong personality for his purposes.

Paul was born in Tarsus, one of the three main centers of Greek culture along with Athens and Alexandria. He was a man of culture who knew the writings of the Greek Philosophers. It was this man steeped in the knowledge of the Old Testament and Greek culture that God chose to be the Apostle of the Gentiles. As all boys in Paul’s day, he learned a trade. He learned how to make tents – a trade that was of great benefit to him during his travels in sharing the Gospel. He was a citizen of Rome - a natural privilege he used much in his ministry.
He was an expert in the Jewish law, so he could speak with Jews of his day and explain to them that Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for. He was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises and Law. He was able to demonstrate that the Old Testament does not contradict the New Testament but leads us to it. He reconciled the Old Testament teaching with the New Testament.

God prepared Paul for his purposes intellectually, vocationally and spiritually. In fact, looking back on his life, Paul says this:

*But…God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace….*

*Galatians 1:15*

God doesn’t waste our time. Every experience you have had in your life to this point - all your training, your intellect, your natural abilities - has been part of God’s training for you. When God calls us to himself, he doesn’t want us to throw away our past experience, training and ability; he wants to redeem those things and use them.

Just like Paul, even before you became a believer, God has been preparing you all along. God wants you to use your abilities for him. Now, as a believer, you place your abilities in his control and say, “God, here I am. I am your servant. I belong to you in totality. My total allegiance is to you. You have the absolute authority and ownership of my life. I am your doulos. I am called to be your spokesperson. I am set apart to share the Gospel.”

There is this fallacy today that if you are really serious about following Christ, you quit your job and go into ministry. Well, you can be sure that God is calling you into ministry…but you don’t have to quit your job to go work at a church.

Every believer is a minister of Jesus Christ. Our vocation is our calling. God is not surprised when he brings a person to himself and finds out that they are a teacher, engineer, professor, homemaker, salesman, doctor, CEO, CFO, COO, farmer, factory worker, lawyer, accountant, or a part of a support staff.
He has been training you all along to use all your experience for him.

He is calling you to make an impact in your sphere of life that no other person can make. When God calls you to do something, it is never second best...God’s will is always the absolute best for you.
So, Romans describes the problem of sin and how the problem is remedied through Jesus. It describes how we can grow and how we need to think about the sovereign God. Then it helps take what we know about God and his work in our lives and apply it to every aspect of our life. The theological portion of the book can be divided in this way.

1:1-17  SETS THE STAGE
1:18-3:20  SIN
3:21-5:21  SALVATION
6:1-8:39  SANCTIFICATION
9:1-11:36  SOVEREIGNTY
12:1-15:13  SO WHAT?
15:14-16:27  SIGNING OFF

The book of Romans has been described as the Bible compressed into one book. It contains the foundational truths of the Christian faith and how to apply those truths. That is why we must have a grasp on it.

God has used this book in such a significant way in the history of the church. A verse in Romans 13 was what God used to stop Augustine from a life of sexual sin and grow him to be a defender of the faith. John Bunyan, writer of Pilgrims Progress, was greatly influenced by this book. The book of Romans brought Martin Luther to saving faith and to lead the Protestant Reformation. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, came to faith one night when he wandered into a meeting where the leader was reading the Preface and Introduction to Martin Luther’s Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. That night he said his heart was “strangely warmed” and he knew that God had forgiven his sins. His life and ministry were never the same. And God certainly used this book in the lives of those Christians in Rome.
The Roman emperor Claudius had written an edict to expel all Jews and Jewish Christians from Rome. But when he died in 54 A.D., his successor, Nero, did not enforce it. By 58 A.D., when Paul wrote this letter, he said,

…I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. Romans 1:8

Paul had wanted to go to Rome but had been hindered in doing so. However, three years after he wrote the letter, in 61 A.D., he did go to Rome, although not in the way he originally desired. Paul had been arrested and put in chains. He was taken to Rome to stand trial and was put under house arrest for three years. Then everything changed.

“Sometime after midnight on July 19, 64 A. D. a night after a beautiful full moon, a fire broke out at the north-east end of Circus Maximus—a huge Roman stadium for chariot racing and other entertainment. It could hold 250,000 people—1/4 of the city’s population. The shops around the stadium were full of combustible materials. The fire secured a hold there and was fanned by the wind. It raged throughout the city for five days. Rome was divided into 14 districts. Three districts were completely destroyed. Seven were severely damaged. Only four were spared. Even Nero’s palace was burned.

Nero was not in Rome during the fire but when word reached him he hurried back to Rome and organized relief efforts—opening the imperial gardens to the homeless and selling grain at greatly reduced rates. But most people did not believe that the fire was accidental. They believed Nero had arranged the fire in order to rebuild Rome to his design and rebuild it he did. Instead of narrow, winding streets there were broad streets with spacious buildings. Every householder was required to have fire-fighting appliances ready accessible.

Nero’s new palace was large and luxurious. It
was called “The Golden House.” Nero received extensive criticism. Pop songs described Rome as being built on what was left over after the building of the palace. Nero needed a scapegoat. And the large Christian community in Rome became an easy target.

The Roman culture was one of immorality and idolatry. Christians would not take part in it. So they were seen as judgmental. They were called “haters of the human race, cultish, and dangerous.” Juvenal, a well-known Roman poet, said that Christians belonged to the sewage. Suetonius, a Roman historian, said Christians were “a race of men given to novel and baneful superstition.” (F. F. Bruce, New Testament History, 399ff)

Tacitus, another Roman historian, wrote this:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace…. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Both Peter and Paul were in Rome during this time. And it was in this period of persecution that these two leaders and thousands of Christians were put to death.

You don’t die for things you don’t believe in… things you are not sure are true. Things you have not settled in your heart. Things that have not become the foundation of your life. But these believers were grounded in the foundations of the truth. And they were willing to die the most horrendous of deaths for the faith.

I have no idea what emotions would overcome me if I knew that I was going to be torn apart by wild dogs or dipped in tar and set on fire. But I do know this, you don’t die for things you are unwilling to live for. That’s why this journey through Romans is so important. We have to get these foundational truths settled.
Let's begin by dealing with the problem of sin. In the first verses of Romans, Paul has set the stage by clearly explaining the theme for this letter. In those 17 verses Paul uses the word “gospel” 6 times (verses 1,2,9,15,16,17). The word gospel is a translation of the Greek “evangelion” and means good news, technically “news of victory” and is always accompanied by joy. That’s why Paul says,

> For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” Romans 1:16-17

There are three parts to this salvation that God offers:

**Justification**—Declared “Not Guilty”

**Sanctification**—Christian Growth

**Glorification**—Eternity in Resurrected Bodies

So salvation is past, present and future. We were saved. We are being saved. We will be saved. That’s good news that should be accompanied by great joy.

Now the fact that salvation exists begs the question—Why do we need it? I mean, we can get along on our own. We are smart, successful people. On top of that, we’re Americans. Our ancestors came over with nothing and pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps. Well, Paul is going to answer that question beginning in Romans 1:18.
The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.....Romans 1:18

Now, as soon as we read the "wrath of God" we need to stop right there and understand what Paul is talking about. The wrath of God is his holy displeasure and vengeance on sin. The skeptic would say—that’s why I don’t like this God of the Bible. He is mean and vindictive. The liberal would say—I don’t believe this part of the Bible. God is only a God of love. And even many Evangelicals would say—well, we don’t talk about God’s wrath because it might offend people. And yet this is where Paul begins.

Why?

We see in Romans 1:17 that righteousness is a characteristic of God. Righteousness means that God acts in a way that is always right. He is the final standard for what is right. The word is a term that comes from a river reed which was used as a construction tool to judge the horizontal straightness of walls and fences. God chose the term to use metaphorically of his own nature. He is the straight edge (rule) by which all things are evaluated.

Now, unless you live in a perfect world you cannot have righteousness without having wrath. In fact, the wrath of God is a demonstration of the righteousness of God. Let me explain it this way. I love my family with a deep love. And I have a certain standard regarding how my family should be treated by others. If I ever saw a person trying to hurt my wife or one of my children, my deep love for them and my standard of righteousness in how you treat my children would be demonstrated by wrath. If anyone in my family was being physically attacked, I would go after that person with vengeance. And in that case you would agree that my anger against the attacker would be the demonstration of my deep love and my level, at least, of righteousness.
And so it is with God. We have to understand that God’s acts are always the action of all his attributes. You can’t carve God up like a Thanksgiving turkey and just take the parts you want. He is not made up of parts. All his attributes work in harmony together. They exist and function as one.

*He does not divide Himself to do a work but works in the total unity of His being.*

-A. W. Tozer

So, the wrath of God is right in sync with his righteousness. A loving God could not stand by emotionless without reacting to evil. God’s wrath is not indiscriminate, uncontrolled, or irrational fury, but is directed against “godlessness and wickedness of people”.

To suppress something means to put it down or put it aside. This is a reference to willful human rejection. I know what is right but I chose to do what is wrong. I am not ignorant of the truth and simply chose not to do it. This is a description of pride. I will reject God and his ways and do what I want to do.

Well, you say, Paul makes an assumption here that everyone knows the truth. What about the person in an unreached area? They don’t have the Bible. No one has gone to tell them about Jesus. They don’t have the truth to suppress. How can they be held accountable? Great question.

*Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.* Romans 1:19

Here Paul is speaking about no one in particular, but everyone in general. God is not dependent on man to deliver his message. What may be known about God is plain, evident, clearly seen, and widely known. God himself has made it plain to them. How, you ask?
For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. Romans 1:20

God has made himself known to all people through natural revelation. His invisible qualities can be seen by his visible creation. By the way this is not something Paul just made up on the spot for sake of argument.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. Psalm 19:1-4

So here’s the deal—God has made himself plain to everyone, at least, by his creation—natural revelation. No person can see creation and not see a great creator. All of creation expresses his love, care, protection and provisions. The person in the deepest, darkest part of the world...has enough revelation of God to be held accountable. Every man is without excuse.

Time out - it’s about Jesus and some have not heard of him. And you are right, that’s our charge to take the Gospel to the ends of the Earth. But every person has enough revelation to know there is a great creator, and the facilities to know the creator, and the knowledge that they cannot reach the creator on their own, they need help. They may not know the name Jesus, but they know they need one to take them to God. Every man will be held accountable for what they know.

All man has the truth—at least natural revelation. All man is without excuse.
But, in general, here’s how man responds.

*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.* Romans 1:21

This is kind of a spiritual history of mankind don’t you think? We were in Washington D. C. recently and spent some time in the Museum of Natural History. The whole theme is based on evolution. Evolution is a godless system that says man is getting better and better. These verses show the opposite is occurring. These verses describe what has happened since Genesis 3. Man knows about God but is unwilling to worship him. Sin impacts man’s reasoning, intellect, emotions and will. Think about it, while we are advancing technologically, we are retreating morally. Here we are in the 21st century in the most advanced country in the world in serious trouble. How does that happen? How can our country be dangerously deep in debt? How can we live in a country where people live in poverty? How can we be at a point where half of marriages end in divorce?

*Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.* Romans 1:22-23

Idols demonstrate that there is this innate desire in man to worship something. But what a shame when instead of worshipping the immortal God we instead worship images made to look like birds, animals and reptiles. But don’t stop there.

We are a country that worships people—whether they play on a field or perform on a screen. Throughout history people have worshipped people. We worship money. While our economic issues are complex, the primary reason for our problem is greed—the love of money. The mortgage crisis resulted from people buying houses they couldn’t afford. How can we be so smart and yet so foolish? In pride and independence man suppressed the truth about
God and bows down before images made to look like mortal men, birds, animals, reptiles, cars, homes, jobs, possessions, hobbies…and the list goes on.

So God has revealed himself. Every man, regardless of what time they lived in history or the place they live in the world, stands without excuse. They suppress the truth, reject God and worship created things instead. How does God respond?

*Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.*
Romans 1:24

*Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.*
Romans 1:28

God gave them over...note he doesn’t give them up, but gives them over. God permits them to go their own way and reap the consequences. He says, you have suppressed the truth, ignored my revelation, and perverted my glory. You have rejected me, so go ahead and have your own way. The Church Father, Chrysostom, likens this to an army commander forced to retreat and abandon his deserting soldiers. He does not push them into the enemy camp but withdraws his protection.

*“But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.*
Psalm 81:11-12

*Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone! Even when their drinks are gone, they continue their prostitution; their rulers dearly love shameful ways. A whirlwind will sweep them away, and their sacrifices will bring them shame.*
Hosea 4:17-19
That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars.

Acts 7:41-42

There is just one short step from idolatry to immorality. If I am my own god or I serve a lifeless god then I will end up doing whatever I please without fear of judgment. Here God speaks specifically of the sin of fornication—sex before or outside marriage. Sex within the commitment of marriage is a holy gift from God. But sex before marriage, whether in the back seat of a car, the bedroom of your apartment, or between two people living together before marriage, is out of bounds. It is an act of sinful rebellion and pride. God says have at it…and reap the consequences.

- The majority of cohabitating relationships either break up or marry within two years.

- The rate of divorce in cohabitating couples is 50% higher than couples who have not lived with each other before marriage.

- After ten years, only 15 out of 100 cohabitating couples are still together.

As one church father, Amrosiaster, well said, “Satan cannot make another law so he perverts the existing law.” Those who chase their sexual desires believe a lie—the lie: The lie of Satan he told Eve in the garden. Don’t believe God. Eat the fruit and you shall be as god. Self-deification always leads to self-indulgence.”

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Romans 1:26-27
Homosexuality was common in Rome at the time this letter was written. In fact, among the aristocracies, sexual relationship among males, especially when one was a minor, was honored as superior to heterosexual love. Why does Paul focus on homosexuality here? This is one of many sins and he’ll get to others.

Remember he is arguing that every man knows the truth about God through natural revelation. Man is made in God’s image. Man is made male and female. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to understand the male parts go together with the female parts. That’s the natural relationship. Anything else is unnatural. And all sin has consequences.

Even if you are not having sex before marriage, outside of marriage, involved in homosexuality—you are not off the hook. For those who think the homosexual gets judged while the gossip gets a pass…or that adultery is worse than bowing before the god of money—think again.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Romans 1:28-31

Now, if you are an English teacher you would have marked Paul down in this part of the letter. Verses 28-31 are one sentence in Greek. Paul is on a roll describing rebellious, fallen, independent mankind.

Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. Romans 1:32
Fallen men like others involved in their sins. They not only like to sin but like others sinning with them. It offers him the excuse, “Everybody is doing it.” Man works so that public opinion is favorable to sin and man is successful. All the time the penalty of this sin is death.

This then is the beginning of the section where Paul explains why we need a Savior. This part of the section tells us why man left to himself is in a helpless and hopeless state. All of us without Jesus are somewhere in these verses. This describes fallen man. The wrath of God refers to the last day. Certainly sin has consequences but while we are on this earth there is forgiveness. One day it will be too late.

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. Romans 2:5

There will be a day of judgment. Again, God’s wrath is in response to his righteousness and for all those who are declared righteous by their trust in Jesus—God’s wrath was poured out on Jesus instead of us. But unrighteousness cannot enter heaven. And without Christ, you will have to endure God’s wrath forever separated from God in hell. Not something we like to think about and a topic many will avoid. But hell is real and eternity is long and God loves you so much that he made a way for his wrath to be avoided. Will you trust in Jesus?
But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. Romans 3:21

Paul has been describing man’s desperate state apart from God. The words “but now” indicate a sharp contrast - a new direction in his letter. In contrast to our helpless state of sin, no one is righteous—not even one. We can’t be moral enough, religious enough, or legalist enough apart from the law, which is a path to God that has been clearly laid out before us. This way to become right with God was clearly laid out for us in the Law and the Prophets—Paul’s description of the entire Old Testament. He cuts to the chase and explains how we can have this right relationship with God.

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Romans 3:22-24

Let’s work through this. These are verses we have to understand. This right standing before God does not come by works, morality or religion—but by faith in Jesus Christ.

Faith in Jesus Christ is not an activity that earns us favor with God. Remember, we are a spiritual corpse. Faith is an instrument through which our right standing is received. Faith in Jesus Christ alone as the One whose death and resurrection places us in a right relationship with God. The means of salvation is always faith.

Why? Why not love, joy, contentment, humility, wisdom? Because faith is the attitude of the heart that is the opposite of depending on myself.
When I come to Christ in faith I say, “I give up! I can’t be religious enough for you. I can’t be moral enough for you. I can’t keep enough laws that put me in a relationship with you. I can’t make myself righteous. Therefore, I trust in you and depend on you completely to give me a right standing before God.”

Now again, why do we need to place our faith in something other than ourselves?

_For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God._ Romans 3:24

This verse gathers up the entire human race into one statement. All have sinned and fall short. This verb phrase “fall short” is in a verb tense that indicates a continued action. It is not that we sinned once, fell short and can work our way back.

We continue to fall short of the glory of God. This is not referring the future glory of God but refers to the divine privilege man originally had in direct communication with God in the garden. Adam’s sin in Genesis 3—The Fall—broke that perfect sinless communion and now causes us to continually fall short of a relationship with God. And, left to ourselves, we can’t do anything about it.

_If you should, from this moment, bid an eternal farewell to this world’s joys, and all the affairs thereof, and busy yourselves with nothing but the salvation of your souls; if you should go into some wilderness, live upon the grass of the field, and be companions to owls; if you should retire to some dark cavern of the earth, and weep there for your sins, until you had wept yourselves blind; if you should confess with your tongue, until it cleave to the roof of your mouth; pray, till your knees grow hard as horns; fast, till your body become like a skeleton, and, after all this, give it to be burnt…Believe it, sirs, if you live and die out of Christ, without being actually united to Him…and without coming under the cover of His atoning blood. Though you should_
do the utmost that any man can do, in keeping the commands of God, you will never see the face of God in peace.

Thomas Boston (Scottish Pastor—late 1600s early 1700s)

But check this out. Those who admit their helplessness and by means of faith believe in Jesus

…and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Romans 3:24

Those who place their faith in Jesus are “justified.” What does that mean? Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God that does two things.

**Justify—to declare righteous.**

1. **God forgives my sins.**

The first thing God does in this legal act of justification is to forgive us our sins. We stand before him as guilty as sin. But he declares us not guilty. He erases our past sin. But if he stopped there we would be back to zero, right? Neutral. An erased chalkboard. God must do more than declare us to be merely neutral. So there is a second part of justification. God declares us to have the merits of perfect righteousness as we stand before him.

How does God do that?

2. **God imputes Christ’s righteousness on me.**

God imputes Christ’s righteousness to us. God thinks of Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us or he regards it as belonging to us. He credits it to our account like a bank statement. He forgives the debt and then credits our account with the righteousness of Christ.

*I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments*
of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness… Isaiah 61:10

The definition of the word ‘impute’ is to attribute, ascribe, assign, accredit. In the process of justification three imputations have happened.

• When Adam sinned, his guilt was imputed to us.
• When Christ died on the cross, our sin was imputed to him.
• Now Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the believer.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, Romans 8:1

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. Romans 3:25

There are two words we need to know. Grace—favor done out of the generosity of God with no expectation of return. There are no strings attached with grace. We are declared righteous “freely” by his grace.

• Grace is always the basis of our salvation.
• Faith is always the means of our salvation.
• Jesus is always the object of our salvation.

Redemption—means to buy back a slave from the marketplace. This concept is presented in the Old Testament.

Let’s say you were living in the Old Testament and ran into some tough times. You had acquired debt that you couldn’t pay. Bankruptcy was not an option. In order to pay the debt you became a slave to your debtor. So it was the family’s responsibility to buy your freedom. The nearest relative with means—called the kinsman-redeemer—would pay the sum of money required to buy you back. That sum of money was called a ransom price.
That’s what Jesus did for us. We became slaves to sin in Genesis 3. Adam’s sin was imputed to us. All have sinned and fall short of a relationship with God. So Jesus came to buy us back. His death on the cross paid the ransom price for us to go free and enjoy a relationship with our heavenly Father.

_For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many._ Mark 10:45

_Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood._ Acts 20:28

_Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies._ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Now, how does all this happen? Well, Jesus died on the cross and we just trust in Jesus and we are saved. So simple. Yes, salvation is free to us. But let’s never forget the great cost.

_God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus._ Romans 3:25-26

Atonement is the work that Jesus did to earn our salvation. Sin separates us from God and God hates sin. His wrath is toward sin that keeps us from him and destroys his creation and one day will place men and women in an eternity apart from him.

Now remember, justification means that God declares us not guilty and he forgives us and he views us as clothed with the righteousness of
Jesus. But that doesn’t just happen…God is a just Judge. Lawbreakers have to be punished. The debt of sin had to be paid. So before we can be declared righteous…Jesus paid for our sin. He became the “sacrifice of atonement.”

Atonement is the work that Jesus did to earn our salvation. The phrase “sacrifice of atonement” comes from one Greek word (hilasterios). It is often translated with the English word Propitiation, which means to appease, placate, calm. A sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God and makes God favorable (propitious) to us. This is at the heart of atonement; the work Jesus did to provide salvation.

As Jesus bore the guilt of our sin, God the Father poured out on him the fury of his wrath. Jesus became the object of intense hatred of sin which God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world.

The grace, faith, Jesus was stated earlier.

**Grace** is always the basis of salvation.  
**Faith** is always the means of salvation.  
**Jesus** is always the object of salvation.

From the beginning of the world, as people by grace believe in God and like Abraham it was credited to him as righteousness, the just God didn’t forgive and forget that sin deserves death. He patiently stored it up. Until at the cross all the fury of all the sin stored up and all the fury of every sin that would be committed was unleashed against Jesus.

The great gift of salvation is free—but never think it is in any way cheap. The wrath of God that should have been ours was poured out on his Son. With this in mind we can better understand Jesus’ cry from the cross

> My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
> Matthew 27:46b

The question does not mean—Why have you
left me forever? Jesus knew he was leaving the world and going to the Father (John 14:28; John 16:10, 17). Jesus knew that he would rise again. Jesus went to the cross voluntarily.

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2

Jesus knew he could still call God “My God.” Jesus knew exactly why he was dying. He knew he was dying for our sins (Mark 10:45). Jesus’ cry is a quotation from Psalm 22:1, a psalm in which the psalmist asks why God is so far from helping him, why God delays in rescuing him.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. Psalm 22:1-2

Jesus, in his human nature, knew he would have to bear our sins, to suffer and to die. But in his human consciousness he probably didn’t know how long the suffering would take. To bear the guilt of millions for a moment would cause great anguish. To face the wrath of God for an instant would be more than any of us could bear. But Jesus’ suffering was not for a minute or a couple minutes or even half an hour.

When would it end? Could there be yet more weight of sin...more wrath? Hour after hour it went on—wrath of God poured out on Jesus wave after wave - until Jesus cried out - My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why must this go on for so long? Will it ever come to an end? Then finally he knew he had borne all the wrath of the Father against our sins. The wrath was removed. God’s anger appeased. He knew that all that remained was to give up his spirit and die.

Then he cried out in victory—It is finished! Which means paid in full—the wrath of God on sin was paid in full.
Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last. Luke 23:46

...He poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. Isaiah 53:12

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law. Romans 3:27-31
I would like to discuss how to live the Christian life. Whereas justification is a one-time-for-all-time event, sanctification is a process, a progressive work of God and man (a partnership) that makes us more and more free from the control of our sinful nature and free to follow more closely to Jesus.

Previously in this booklet, we learned that as believers we have been separated from our sinful nature. It still exists but it no longer controls us.

We have been freed from the control of our sinful nature. We don’t have to sin. But the sinful nature—like an old master—will continue to call out to us and sometimes we will listen to its voice. Sometimes its voice will be aggressive. It will remind us that a person wronged us and hatred will arise in our emotion. It will grab onto a person or an image and invite us into the land of lust. Sometimes the voice will be sympathetic. “You have been working hard, haven’t you?” You desire to unwind in some sinful thoughts or some inappropriate viewing or a flirtatious conversation or fudging the report just a bit. “You really don’t need to tithe. Spend the money on something you really want. God’s so happy to have you on his team; he won’t mind this one time.”

Sometimes the sinful nature will be brutal. It will say—“You don’t really believe that a person dying on the cross can forgive your sins do you?” Doubts will arise. You can’t depend on grace.

“Man, you’re not working hard enough. You really think salvation is free. Come on…get with it.”
All of us, for whatever reason, have inclinations to certain acts of sins and doubt. And that is where we will hear the old master calling us most often and clearly.

And therein lies the battle of the Christian life. I have trusted in Christ. I love him. I want to follow hard after Christ and make an impact for him AND I want to listen and at times follow my old master. I don’t have to give into him but I want to. And that battle will rage within me until the day I die.

Sometimes a snapshot from the battle field looks pretty good. There will be spiritual victories. I will hear the old master call and I will refuse to reconnect. Sometimes the snapshot will catch me in the act of surrendering to the enemy. I don’t have to but I will. That’s the battle.

So let’s get back to Romans and see how this works.

Now you remember back in Romans 6:1, when Paul had been emphasizing grace so someone said, “So, Paul, I will just continue a life of sin so that grace may increase. I will demonstrate great sin so God can show his great grace?”

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? Romans 6:1

Now, in Romans 6:15, a similar question is asked.

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! Romans 6:15

Back in Romans 6:1 the question was about a life of habitual sin. The verb is in present subjunctive speaking of habitual continuous action. Here the question is about planned occasional acts of sin.

“Hey Paul, I get it about living a life of habitual continuous sin. I mean I have been separated from my sinful nature and joined with Jesus—so how can I live in continuous sin? But what about every once in a while...just occasionally planned out one-off acts of sin?”
“So you know I am a believer…certainly I don’t get drunk…that’s not me…but the annual company picnic is coming up…and as you know the best beer is free beer and it’s kind of expected of me to be one of the guys and as a woman I have to show that I am one of the guys. So I will need to have a few…but no problem because I will have a designated driver to get me home. Man, it’s not something I do but once a year….”

“So I’m dating this person and we’ve been dating for a long time and we have been handling ourselves pretty well. But I really love her and I admit, I want to be intimate with her…and we are going out to eat this weekend…and then going back to her place to watch a movie and I think I’ll see how far things might go…just the one time…certainly we won’t do it all the time…but occasionally….”

“So I am in this cut-throat sales force. You talk about competitive…. And I tow the ethical line…you can ask anybody. But there is there deal I have to land. And just on this one deal…just this one time…I am willing to do anything to get it.”

“I have this really hard test coming up. I mean my final grade depends on this test. And you don’t understand how much pressure my parents put on me to make not just good grades. So someone got ahold of the final exam. I have never cheated like that before…but, man, I really need this one. So my friend is making some copies and just this once I am going to cheat…just this one time. “

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! 
Romans 6:15

Paul answers this question the same way he answered the “shall we live in continual sin” question. “Me genoito!” The strongest Greek negative. BY NO MEANS!

Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to
sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? Romans 6:16

Doesn’t matter if you live in continuous sin or one-off planned acts of occasional sin—“You are slaves to the one whom you obey....”

The word “slave” here is the Greek word “doulos”

Slave (Doulos)
• One whose will is swallowed up in the will of another.
• One who is bound to another.
• One who serves another to the disregard of his own interests.

You are slaves to the one you obey.

Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? Romans 6:16

... “which leads to death” Paul is not saying that a believer who sins is back under the penalty of sin. He is making a general statement that the old master of our sinful nature results in the natural consequence of death—why would we want to follow a master with such a dead end?

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. Romans 6:17

What is Paul talking about? The Gospel. You understood that...

You accepted it “wholeheartedly” - inwardly and genuinely, not merely externally. Let’s stop there for a second. Have you accepted the Gospel wholeheartedly—innovably and genuinely? Not talking about just walking an aisle or signing a card or repeating a prayer. I am talking about an inward agreement to and acceptance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
When that happens…

You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. Romans 6:18

Paul is addressing our relationship to Christ using the illustrations of slavery. And he knows that all illustrations break down at some point. Being enslaved to God is not correct in one sense because God does not hold his children in slavery.

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:34-36

However, Paul knows that his reader understands the word and it does describe our relationship to the sinful nature before we trusted in Christ. So he uses “slavery” to contrast the believer’s relationship with Christ. But, before he does, he basically apologizes for using this analogy.

I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. Romans 6:19

He feels the Romans don’t quite get it yet. So he uses terminology from human experience that they can understand. Now remember good teachers repeat themselves. So in the rest of Romans 6:19, Paul basically repeats what he said in Romans 6:16. Look at that word “holiness.” It is the Greek word “hagiasmos.” It means “to dedicate to the service of and to loyalty to” God (Louw Nida 53.44 53.44). It means to consecrate or devote or give yourselves to God with a whole heart…holding nothing back. This is the word that is often translated “sanctification.” It means to set yourself apart. We refer to sanctification as the life-long process of setting ourselves apart for God.
So now we offer each part of our bodies to the control of God...as slaves of righteousness (right living...doing what is right in God's sight) leading to....process of...sanctification.

_When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!_ Romans 6:20-21

Being a slave to our sinful nature is not a very good proposition. Look at the benefits. The payback of following our sinful nature is the things we are now ashamed of. Those things result in death! Following the sinful nature results in physical and spiritual death.

_But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life._ Romans 6:22

We have been released from the slavery of sin. Notice it is something that has been done to us. We were entrapped. But God set us free. He unplugged us from the control of our sinful nature and he plugged us into the power source of the Holy Spirit.

Check out the benefits.

It leads to holiness. There’s that word again—"hagiasmos" (sanctification). Think of it in two ways...

_Sanctification_
- Positional—God has set us free and set us apart.
- Progressive—a progressive partnership with God that makes us more and more free from the control of our sinful nature and free to follow more closely to Jesus.

Paul wraps up this section with a very familiar verse.
For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 6:23

The word “wages” here refers to the earnings of a soldier. It is the salary that a soldier works for and deserves. The wages or the payoff of having the sinful nature as your master is death. It is physical death, spiritual death and eternal death. There is no good ending to the life controlled by the sinful nature, no matter what the few years on earth produce, no matter how impressive a life you make for yourself, it is all temporal and ends in death. Hebrews 9:27 says that it is appointed unto man once to die and after that comes the judgment.

So we could do our best and work our hardest and put in the time but at the end of the day—the payoff is death. Think about it, that’s the dead end track that many people are on. They are doing their best to earn a relationship with God. However hard they work and however good they are at the end of the day, they get the same result.

So, something radical has to happen.

God offers a free gift—freely and graciously given. And that gift is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. The gift of eternal life is free to us... because it was purchased on the cross by Christ Jesus our Lord. The gift of eternal life is free to us...but it came at great cost to Christ Jesus our Lord.

He who supposes that Jesus Christ only lived and died and rose again in order to provide justification and forgiveness of sins for His people, has yet much to learn. Whether he knows it or not, his is dishonouring our blessed Lord, and making Him only a half Savior. The Lord Jesus has undertaken everything that His people’s souls require; not only to deliver them from the guilt of their sins by His atoning death, but from the dominion of their sins, by placing in their hearts the Holy Spirit; not only to justify them, but also to sanctify them.

-J. C. Ryle, Holiness
In Acts 12 there is an intriguing story about God’s great power and control over all things. King Herod, one of the great people pleasers of all time, had the Apostle Peter arrested knowing how much it would thrill those under his reign. So Peter was locked up in prison as the church earnestly prayed for him.

The night before Herod brought him to trial, Peter was bound in chains and sleeping between two soldiers. Sentries stood guard at the entrance. Then, suddenly, an angel appeared. The chains fell off Peter’s wrists and, as instructed, Peter followed the angel out of prison. They passed by the guards and when they came to the iron gate leading to the city, it opened for them. Peter at first thought he was in a dream, But then the angel left and Peter realized he was indeed out on the street.

So, when Peter realized what happened, he headed to Mark’s mother’s house where people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked on the door and a servant girl named Rhoda answered the door.

When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!” “You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.” But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Acts 12:14-16

In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Acts 12:18-19
What a great story! Is God powerful or what? He is sovereign over all. He can get anything done he wants to get done. He can do it directly or send an angel. I love that story. Can you imagine the celebration? God answers prayers! Oh... there is one part of the story I left out.

_It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread._

Acts 12:1-3

Now that puts a damper on things, doesn’t it? What happened? Was no one praying for James? Maybe their prayers were not intense enough? Long enough? Fervent enough? Maybe they left out some needed prayer language.

Remember the mood at Mark’s mom’s house when Peter arrived? What was the mood like at James’ mom’s house when they learned that his head had been chopped off? Why did God deliver Peter but not James? As we live this life following hard after Christ there are some questions we can’t answer, some things we can’t understand, and we have to conclude that either God is in control or not. Either he can be trusted or not. Either God directs the affairs of man or as the Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote:

_God wants the righteous to live peaceful happy lives, but sometimes even he cannot bring it about. It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims._

_-When Bad Thing Happen to Good People_

To help put this answer in perspective, Paul wrote these words to believers in Rome.

_And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose._ Romans 8:28
It’s in this section on Christian growth that Paul tells us that when we love God and when we live demonstrating our love to him, he will work all things out for good. And then Paul explains that while there are some things we can’t understand now, God is working in the context of an eternal framework.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. Romans 8:28-30

Paul explains that God has been at work in your life from eternity past; he predestined you to be conformed to the image of his Son. At a point and time in history, he called you - Jesus would say God drew you. No one comes to me unless the Father draws them (John 6:44). You have been justified—declared not guilty and declared righteous. In God’s eyes you are glorified.

Now, as soon as you read these verses some questions come to your mind. Hmm….

• So does that mean there are certain people God chooses and, if so, on what basis does he make the choice?
• If he calls certain people to himself, can they reject the call?
• Does he force them into his kingdom?
• What about my free will?
• What about human responsibility?

And what about the word “predestination”? Isn’t that some Presbyterian or Calvinistic term? Sounds like I am some robot.

And, if God is sovereign, what about the nation of Israel that he chose to be his own and now as a whole they rejected Jesus?

In Romans 9, 10 and 11, Paul responds to these questions.

9:30-10:21—Questions about God’s Plan: Has it worked?

11:1-32—Questions about God’s Promises: Are they renegotiable? Do they need adjusted? Do they need changed?

I can promise you that as we work our way through these verses some of you are going to be stretched a bit. We are going to see undeniable teaching about God’s sovereignty and clear teaching about man’s responsibility. J. I. Packer calls this an antinomy.

An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together.

-Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, p.24

I want to make clear that I am not coming at this portion of Scripture from an Arminian or Calvinistic standpoint. There is great danger when we have more passion for a systematic consistency or a systematic explanation or a personal viewpoint or tradition instead of taking Scripture for what it says and learning to live with some mystery.

Now to appropriately set the framework for this section, let’s begin at the end. Let’s look at Romans 11:33. So, Paul, you have spent the last three chapters dealing with the sovereignty of God and man’s responsibility. Wrap this up for us. Put it in a nice little sound bite for us. What is your conclusion? What truth do you want us to take home?
Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

“Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”

“Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?”

For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Romans 11:33-36

God is beyond man’s full discovery.
God’s ways are beyond man’s comprehension.
God is beyond the need for man’s counsel.
God is not indebted to man.
God is the first cause—Source from which all things proceed.
God is the efficient cause—Agent through which all things exist.
God is the final cause—to him all things return and wait his judgment.

While we can know everything about having a relationship with God through faith alone in Christ alone, we are not going to be able to figure out “the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.” How can we as finite men and women be so arrogant as to think in our puny little brains we are going to understand everything about the eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, holy creator of all things? Now to get to that conclusion, Paul asked three questions about God’s person.

God’s Person
• Has God failed?
• Is God just?
• Is God fair?

So, in chapter 8 Paul told us that God works all things together for good. He is sovereign over all. If he is for us, who can be against us? Nothing can separate us from God’s love. So some heard this and said—time out. You say all those things about God’s promises, but how
can we believe them? God made some great promises to the nation of Israel and it doesn’t seem like they are coming true. How can we trust God’s promises for us if he can’t keep his promises to Israel?

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen. Romans 9:1-5

The people of Israel were adopted as sons—chosen as his children, given the covenants through leaders—Abraham (Gen. 15); David (1 Sam. 7), provided a law to instruct them and a temple to worship in. From this nation has been traced the human ancestry of Christ! Privileged people still rejected the message of Christ? It seems like all the work that God put into Israel was for naught. Was he not able to bring Israel to himself? Maybe this sovereign God failed.

It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.” Romans 9:6-9

All Jews are members of God’s chosen people in a comprehensive sense, which is a great privilege. But there is an Israel within Israel—a
spiritual group within the physical group. Who are they? They are the ones Paul told us about in Roman 8. The ones he foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified. To illustrate his sovereign choice Paul uses two examples. The first example is Abraham and Sarah. Abraham married Sarah, but Sarah could not have children. So she gave her servant, Hagar, to Abraham. From that relationship Ishmael was born. Then, in their old age, with Abraham who was 99 and Sarah who was well past child bearing years, God gave them a miracle child—Isaac.

Ismael was the child of the flesh born naturally—representing the nation of Israel. Isaac was a miracle child—something only God can do—representing the spiritually chosen Israel within the nation of Israel. Both were Abraham’s offspring. But one, Isaac, was sovereignly chosen by God’s supernatural work even before he was born.

Another example of sovereign choice is the story of Rebekah and Isaac. This one involved the choice of one twin over another. Check that out. God’s choice was not based on what they had done or would do.

Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” Romans 9:11-13

God has already determined that Jacob would be the chosen brother. The word “hated” does not mean “abhorrence.” Here it is describing a relationship in relative terms. God’s love was shown in the higher choice of Jacob. His relationship with Esau was secondary. Here’s an example:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:26
Scripture clearly says that we are to love our father and mother. But the love has to be secondary to our love for Christ. God showed mercy and care for Esau through his life (Deuteronomy 23:7). But not based on any criteria that the human mind could understand God sovereignly chose Jacob as his special instrument.

Paul uses these examples to show that God’s word has never failed. There has always and still remains a future for the nation of Israel. Within Israel God has always had a remnant of his people. Within the nation he chose Isaac and Jacob.

Now, that raises a second question: Can God do that? Is that a character flaw? Isn’t that unjust?

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. Romans 9:14-16

God’s work with man is always just. Remember, Paul has already told us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. God would be just if we were all punished for our sins. The issue here is God’s free and sovereign choice. That choice is not dependent on man but upon God’s eternal, perfect person. The mercy of God is dependent on God alone.

It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. For Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. Romans 9:16-18

God raised Pharaoh up in order to demonstrate his power. God raised up Pharaoh so that his power would be proclaimed throughout the whole earth. God used Pharaoh to demonstrate his mercy and his power. God’s sovereign works
are not arbitrary. They are always for a purpose. In fact, 40 years after this incident with Pharaoh when God sent spies to Jericho, listen to Rahab’s declaration.

I know that the LORD has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Joshua 2:9

Now Paul knows that the whole Pharaoh thing is not going to set well with people. If he has mercy on whom he has mercy and hardens whom he hardens, then how can he hold man responsible? So he asks another question: Is God fair?

One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?”

But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Romans 9:19-20

This reminds me of the way God responded to Job. Remember all the stuff that Job went through and after a while was worn out. And finally God answered him.

Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm.

He said:

“Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it?
On what were its footings set, 
or who laid its cornerstone—
while the morning stars sang together 
and all the angels shouted for joy?
Job 38:1-7

God is the all-powerful God of Creation. He is the one who loved you so much he sent his Son. Jesus was rejected, beaten, spat on, thorns jammed into his head, nails driven through his hands and feet. On the cross he died a shameful death. “Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree.” God raised him from the dead. And it is through the work of Jesus and his resurrection that we have been declared not guilty and clothed with righteousness.

God is the one whose very mercy allows our hearts to beat, blood to flow through our veins, gives us air to breathe and food to eat. Our existence is a gift from him. God demonstrated that love to us while we were still sinners. In fact, it was our sins that put Jesus on the cross. We had turned on him even after he declared us not guilty and adopted us as his sons and daughters. Let’s face it - our obedience has been erratic at best. We are not where we want to be, need to be, spiritually. And in spite of our sin, doubts, failure, spiritual anemia, God still loves us and forgives us and restores us. Nothing can separate us from his love. He sees us as justified and glorified as good as with him. One day he will call us home to live for him forever in heaven. All his ways are perfect, right, holy, just and fair…even if we cannot fully grasp God’s ways with our finite brains.

So Paul says…excuse me…Who are you to talk back to God?

Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use? Romans 9:21

After all God has done for us we have no right to call him into court.
What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? Romans 9:22-24

God does not work arbitrarily. There is sovereign design and purpose in all he does. What if God did all the things you are taking him to court over...just for you? What if he did the things you cry foul in order “to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy? What if he did all this for you the ones “whom he prepared in advance for glory.” His love never fails and his Word never fails.

Here’s my question: Can you accept that God is King—he orders and controls all things, human actions among them, in accordance with his own eternal purposes? And at the same time he is Judge—he holds every man responsible for the choices he makes and the courses of action he pursues (Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God p. 27).

Remember, the great theologian J. I. Packer calls this an antinomy—two truths side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable.

What should one do, then, with an antinomy? Accept it for what it is, and learn to live with it. Refuse to regard the apparent inconsistency as real; put down the semblance of contradiction to the deficiency of your own understanding; think of the two principles as not rival alternatives but, in some way that at present you do not grasp, complementary to each other.

-Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, p. 26

Can you accept that you can’t understand all of God’s ways? Until you do, you will never be able to truly worship him.
Can you accept that all of God’s ways may not fit nice and neatly into your system of theology? Until you do, you will never be able to serve him.

I would encourage you to get into God’s Word and see for yourself how much he loves you and desires a relationship with you. God sent his Son to die for our sin so that we wouldn’t have to. Remember,

• Grace is always the basis of our salvation.
• Faith is always the means of our salvation.
• Jesus is always the object of our salvation.

Sanctification is a process, a progressive work of God and man (a partnership) that makes us more and more free from the control of our sinful nature and free to follow more closely to Jesus.

God is sovereign. The pieces may not fit all together in a nice and neat frame, but we are mere humans trying to put the omnipotent, omniscient, all-knowing Creator of all things past, present and future in a box that fits our understanding.

So, today, it is up to you. Trust in Jesus as the only way that you can have a relationship with the living God. Enter into a new life of meaning and significance. Partner with the Holy Spirit to live a life of impact and obedience. Allow God to use you for his purposes and to impact the people in your life for his glory. God has given us all we need to do what he has called us to do. Begin your relationship with him today.