

The Free Gift of Sonship

Romans 6-11

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8 Interactive Bible Studies for Small Groups and Individuals

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HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’— interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

The studies contain five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- numbered questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible (usually there will be some **coloured text like this** to indicate that there is a related sidebar)
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don't need the formal structure of a 'group' to gain maximum benefit.
- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

STUDY 1

Wanted, dead *and* alive

Romans 6

The story so far...

The most important thing we can learn in life —far more important than short-term success, or material or physical comfort, or even satisfaction in human relationships—is how to be right with God. And how to be right with God (or **'justified'**) is exactly what Paul has talked about in the first five chapters of Romans. Against the terrible black hole of our sin, and God's righteous anger against sin, Paul has set out the rescue mission of Jesus Christ. God sends his only son into the world as a man, to save us from our sin by his death on the cross.

The wonder of this is seen all the more clearly when we realize how desperate our situation was. Nothing we did, or could do, was able to save us. Even knowing God's law only highlighted wickedness.

God in mercy gave Jesus his son as the sacrifice for sin. He died in our place, turning us from enemies into friends. When we trusted him, we moved from death to life—a new life, characterized by continuing trust and joy.

That's the story so far in Romans.

But what does this mean for life now and into the future? We are standing on the mountaintop of God's grace, and it is time to take in the view.

SIDEBAR: 'Justification'

The big idea in Romans 1-5 is 'justification' or 'righteousness'. 'Righteousness' and 'justification' come from the same word in Greek, and the basic meaning of the word is for something to be right and true, or to be declared right and true. Paul teaches us that the righteous God, who is righteously angry at my sin, tells me that because of Jesus' righteous work I can be declared righteous—that is, right with him, or 'justified'.

To refresh your memory about these majestic ideas, read back over Romans 3:21-26 and 5:6-9.

Read Romans 6:1-4.

1. Why might Romans 1-5 lead to the question in Romans 6:1?

2. What do you think it means to be **baptized** into Christ Jesus and his death (v. 3)?

SIDEBAR: What does 'baptism' mean?

'Baptism' is from a Greek word meaning dipping, dunking, washing or plunging. It's something we do to dishes and dirty children, or ourselves after some hard digging in the garden. In the Gospels, John the Baptizer did it by plunging people into the waters of the River Jordan.

One significant clue to understanding Romans 6:3-4 is that in the baptism described here, no water is mentioned. Remember this as you answer question 2.

3. What's the ultimate purpose of being "buried therefore with him by baptism into death" (v. 4)?

Read Romans 6:5-11.

4. What did the death of Christ achieve for us? How did it achieve it?

United with Christ

Right at the heart of this passage, as with much of Paul's writing, is the idea of 'union with Christ'. The idea of 'union' here is a bit like the idea that we are all playing on the same team, with the Lord Jesus as our captain—but that is still too weak an illustration to describe the reality of 'union' with Christ.

You could also say that being 'in Christ' is like being in a new place, a new safe zone in the universe, where our sin has already been judged, and death has been defeated, and where we live forever. By being 'in Christ'—through being united with him—we share in everything that he achieved. His death becomes our death; and his resurrection, ours as well. More importantly, as far as Romans is concerned, his righteousness becomes ours.

How are we joined to Christ like this? How do we become 'united with Christ'? The answer of Romans is 'faith'. By putting our trust in him.

If you want to chase this idea a bit further, compare Romans 5:12-21, 1 Corinthians 15:20-24, Ephesians 2:1-10 and Philippians 3:8-11.

5. From verses 5-11, when we are united with Christ:

a. What does our future hold?

b. How should we think about ourselves in the present?

Rightly understanding our new status in Christ is first and foremost a great cause for thankfulness. Simply by trusting him, we've been put right with God. Knowing this may not make our personal struggles to live the Christian life any easier, but it sets us off on the right footing. There's no need for any anxiety or fearfulness about where we stand with God. We've been set free instead to consider how we are to live our new lives in Christ. The Christian life is not lived in fear of falling under God's judgement, but with great confidence and hope for the future. You may even like to pause at this point of the study to give thanks to God for everything he has done for us in uniting us with his Son...

But where next? Having realized where we stand with Christ, Paul invites us to consider what the Christian life will now look like from a moral point of view.

Read Romans 6:12-23.

6. What do you think is involved in being a slave to "sin" or a slave to "impurity" (vv. 6, 17, 19)?

7. What is involved in being a slave to "righteousness" or a slave of "God" (vv. 18, 19, 22)?

8. Now use the following table to summarize what you've read in Romans 6.

Life before becoming a Christian	Becoming a Christian	Life after becoming a Christian
e.g. enslaved to sin (v. 6)	e.g. died to sin (v. 2)	e.g. walking in newness of life (v. 4)

9. Looking back over the whole chapter, Paul is answering a basic objection to his gospel. If we have been saved by grace, completely forgiven, justified and set free, does that mean we can just keep sinning? Does the gospel of free grace lead to the freedom to sin as much as we want to?

Try to come up with a two or three sentence summary of Paul's answer to these questions.

Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- What is your own memory of what life was like before you were a Christian? How would you respond to someone who thinks this Romans 6 picture of the pre-Christian life is too harsh?

- Imagine someone asked you, “What does it really mean to be a Christian, and how do you become one?” And imagine that you had just been reading Romans 6 in your quiet time. How would you answer the question?

- “I’m forgiven, so why shouldn’t I keep sinning?” Imagine a new Christian asked you this question. How would you answer them by pointing to two or three verses in Romans 6?

- What practical suggestions come out of Romans 6 to help us in our struggle against sin?

Give thanks and pray

- Thank God that we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection.
- Pray that we will live now as slaves of righteousness.

STUDY 2

It's against the law!

Romans 7

When you read Romans 7 for the first time, it is easy to identify with the anguish that Paul is going through. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom 7:15). We know that his words here could be echoed by us almost daily.

Over the years, however, a lot of Christians have asked themselves whether we really *are* meant to identify with Paul's words here. After all, Paul is a unique person: a Jew, and an apostle. We note too that he is emphatic in saying, "*I* do not understand *my* own actions".¹ Perhaps then we shouldn't be too hasty in putting ourselves in his shoes, as it is fairly obvious that we are not him.

Still others have noticed that while chapter 7 is full of struggle and internal conflict, chapter 8 by contrast strikes a powerful note of victory. This victory is associated with the coming of God's Holy Spirit. Perhaps this suggests that for those Christians who are filled with the Spirit's power (as opposed to those who aren't) the Christian life becomes a life of triumph over sin and difficulty (assuming of course that the passage is about us and not Paul). If so, how do we make this transition into Spirit-filled living?

As knotty as these questions are, it will be a great help in staying on track and understanding the message of Romans 7 if we realize that the passage is focused on answering two *quite different questions*. It is these two questions that ought to guide us on our path through the chapter.

Read fairly quickly through Romans 7.

1. What are the two questions that Paul focuses on in this chapter?

a.

b.

Now go back and re-read Romans 7:1-6.

2. What is the point of Paul's illustration about marriage?

¹ The original Greek adds to the impression that Paul is now speaking specifically about his own experience, by using the Greek word *ego* for "I". This use of *ego* is not grammatically necessary but only strengthens the emphasis on the word "I".

3. What do these verses say about the place of the **law** in the life of the Christian?

SIDEBAR: What is the 'law'?

The word 'law' can refer to many things. Even in Romans, some commentators suggest that the meaning of the word can vary from verse to verse. You will have to work out whether you agree with them—especially in this chapter. However, the obvious assumption (and the logical place to start) is that when Paul speaks about the 'law', he means what every careful reader of the Old Testament might mean. That is, he is referring to the law of Moses, and especially to the ten commandments. Notice, for example, that Paul quotes directly from the ten commandments to illustrate his own experience with God's law. "You shall not covet" is the law that caused Paul to stumble (Rom 7:7; cf. Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21).

Paul will have some important things to say about how we should relate to the law of Moses as the passage unfolds.

4. What reasons do these verses give us for continuing to live godly lives and struggle against sin?

5. How might the first six verses lead to the question in verse 7?

Paul's attitude to the law seems negative. But in Paul's Bible—the Old Testament—the law is spoken of with great warmth and pride.² The law is God's word. It is there to be obeyed. It is given as a gracious provision for God's people, and for the righteous servant of God in the Old Testament, it was a cause for rejoicing and thankfulness. When Moses talks of the law in

² If you want to see this, you could check, for example, Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5, 30:11-20; Joshua 1:1-9; Nehemiah 8:1-12; Psalm 1, 19:7-14, 119:1-8 (and indeed the whole of Psalm 119!).

Deuteronomy 30, he is quite literally setting before the people “life” (if they obey) “and death” (if they do not). Everything that Paul says about the Law in Romans has to be understood against this backdrop, and especially the section we’re about to look at.

Read Romans 7:7-12.

6. Paul rejects the idea that the law is sinful. So what, according to Paul, is the connection between law and sin?

7. What does the law expose about someone?

8. Given what Paul says here, how could the law be useful in evangelism?

Read Romans 7:13-20.

9. Describe, step by step, how sin uses law to produce death.

10. How do you personally respond to Paul’s description of his experience?

Whichever way you may have jumped on the question of who Paul is talking about in this passage (himself, a non-Christian, a Christian, or some other person or category of person), Paul’s focus here is squarely on God’s law. We can never say that God’s law is sin. And it certainly isn’t the fault of God’s perfect law that we respond to his commands by rebelling against them!

But what does Paul conclude about the law? Does he say anything about its ongoing place in the Christian life? Christians have traditionally agreed that yes, the law does have a role in the life of the Christian, in convicting us of sin and pointing us to Christ. Likewise, we find that many of the commands of the Old Testament law are repeated or in some cases used to highlight a principle (see, for example, 1 Cor 9:9-10). But Paul's warnings here about the negative aspects of the law in the life of humanity help us to be careful of how we are to relate to God's Old Testament commandments. The reality of sin will mean that our relationship to the law, even as Christians made righteous, is not straightforward.

However, there is no doubt at all that we ought to keep reading God's law to strengthen ourselves. The law is always relevant to the Christian, because it teaches us of God's grace, of God's character, of God's will, and most clearly of our need for Christ. What we must not do is relate to God as lawgiver—we are, as Jesus said, no longer servants, but friends (John 15:15).

Read Romans 7:21-25.

11. What is the ongoing principle (or 'law') that Paul describes regarding the law of Moses?

12. Why does Paul offer thanks for Jesus in verse 25?

13. How and when does Jesus set us free from the body of death?

14. Paul has said earlier (in vv. 1-6 above) that in Christ we are "released from the law". But in verses 21-25, he seems to see the law as having an ongoing place in the Christian life. How do you think these two lines of thought fit together?

15. Try to summarize in a sentence or two what Romans 7 teaches us about the Old Testament law.

STUDY 3

The Spirit of Christ

Romans 8:1-17

Most people who have been Christians for any length of time have had the experience of despairing at sin. Will I ever improve? Will I ever manage to conquer that recurring sin that I seem to fall into time and again?

At various times in Christian history, the idea has become popular that there *is* a fast solution to sin in the life of the believer through a special work of the Holy Spirit. According to this view, if Christians would only yield themselves to the Holy Spirit, if they would just ‘let go and let God’, then their lives would be transformed from despair to victory.

Some who are attracted to this version of the Christian life will point for confirmation to this section of Romans—which is, after all, about the Christian life and the role of the Holy Spirit. They will notice that Paul’s tone of voice right at the end of Romans 7 changes drastically. “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Paul cries in despair. His answer? “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Chapter 8 then begins to talk about the work of the Holy Spirit.

So can we expect a distinct and drastic change because of the Holy Spirit’s work? To find the answer, let’s look carefully at what this passage has to say about the Christian life, and the indwelling power of the Spirit.

Read Romans 8:1-4.

1. What does it mean that there is “no condemnation”? (Compare 5:1 and discuss any similarities or differences.)

2. Paul also says that we have been “set free in Christ Jesus”.

a. What have been set free from?

b. How did God do this?

c. What is the result of our freedom?

SIDEBAR: The 'flesh'

'Flesh' is a tricky word in the Bible because it can be used in slightly different ways. It can mean simply the physical stuff of our bodies, the 'flesh' that hangs off our bones. It can also thus refer to our flawed humanity—that we are 'but flesh'.

But especially in Paul's writings, 'flesh' takes on a larger meaning. When Paul says that some walk according to the 'flesh', and some according to the Spirit, 'flesh' obviously means more than physicality or even humanity. It refers to this sinful, godless age in which we live, which is opposed to God, and which is heading for death and judgement. This is the age or realm of the 'flesh', from which Christians have now been set free. We live according to the new age of the Spirit, the age to come.

3. Listed below are the four verses in Romans up to this point that talk about the Holy Spirit. Summarize what they teach about him.

- Romans 1:4

- Romans 2:29

- Romans 5:5

- Romans 7:6

The result of our freedom

God sent his Son, says Paul, to take away our condemnation—to be condemned in our place, in fact. This was so that “the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:4).

Some take this to mean that through Christ's sacrifice, and the gift of the Spirit, Christians are now set free to obey and 'fulfil' the law.

However, this is an unlikely reading of the verse—given all that Paul has already said in Romans about our inability to keep the law. What he is saying in Romans 8:4 is that the righteous requirement of the law has finally been fulfilled in us because we are in Christ, and Christ has perfectly obeyed and fulfilled the law on our behalf.

We are now set free to lead a new life in the Spirit, and it will bear fruit in our lives, as the chapter goes on to say—but that is different from saying that in our lives we end up fulfilling “the righteous requirement of the law”.

Let's look more closely at what our new life in the Spirit is like.

Read Romans 8:5-17.

4. Two states of life are contrasted in these verses: life according to the flesh, and according to the Spirit. Go through the passage and write down whatever you can learn about each.

Life in the flesh	Life in the Spirit

5. From verses 5-17, what we do learn about:

- a. the relationship between God the Father and the Holy Spirit?

- b. the relationship between the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit?

- c. the relationship between God the Father and the Lord Jesus?

6. Re-read Romans 8:12-17. Romans 8:9 assures us that it is impossible to be a Christian without the Spirit of Christ. Given that we have God's Spirit in us, what obligation (or debt) does this give us?

7. How does the Spirit work with us as we fulfil this obligation?

8. How does the work of the Spirit give us confidence that we are God's adopted sons?

9. Try to sum up in a couple of sentences what this passage in Romans 8 tells us about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Forgetting the Holy Spirit?

Some Bible-believing churches are criticized for forgetting the work of the Holy Spirit or neglecting his activity, but what does this mean? How would you know if you were neglecting the Holy Spirit? Where do we see the Spirit at work in our lives?

In Romans, Paul covers the whole of the Christian life, including the work of the Holy Spirit, from beginning to end. Where does Paul's emphasis fall when he speaks about the Spirit in this chapter?

Two words: *prayerful obedience*. The Holy Spirit moves the Christian to trust the gospel of grace (expressed in prayer), and to live the gospel of grace (expressed in obedience, or "putting to death the misdeeds of the body"). God's Spirit leads us to trust Jesus, to commit ourselves to our heavenly Father, and to love others. Thinking about the Spirit in other ways is either a sidelight or, at worst, a distraction.

Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- Someone insists that once you've become a Christian, if you want to live a victorious Christian life, then you need to experience an additional and extra filling with the Spirit. Use Romans 8 to respond.

- Romans 8:15-17 speaks of how we have been adopted as sons by God, such that we call him Father. JI Packer wrote this about the blessing of adoption:

If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and

better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. 'Father' is the Christian name for God.³

What do you think of Packer's words? How well do they match your own grasp of Christianity?

- Using Romans 8:1-17, what encouragement do we have that the Christian life is going to turn out well?

- Why is the Christian life so hard? How would you encourage someone who is struggling?

Give thanks and pray

- Thank God that he has given us his Holy Spirit.
- Thank God that he has adopted us as his sons in Christ.
- What else does this passage cause you to give thanks for?
- Pray that we will "put to death the deeds of the flesh" by the Holy Spirit.

³ JI Packer, *Knowing God*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1975, p. 224.

STUDY 4

The perseverance of the saints

Romans 8:18-39

We've all seen relationships break apart under pressure, and most likely we'll have had that experience ourselves. But what about a relationship with God? Could it also come apart at the seams? That's the big question we're considering as we come to this study.

Read Romans 8:18-25.

1. In verse 18:

- a. What two things is Paul comparing?

- b. What is the relationship between these things and the struggles mentioned in the first half of chapter 8?

2. In the table below, write down what Paul says in verses 18-25 about the present and the future.

"this present time"	"to be revealed"

3. How do we see and experience the 'groaning' of the creation?

4. When we groan, what are we groaning for?

5. What is the nature of the hope in which we were saved (v. 24)? How does this help us understand the suffering and struggles of life?

SIDEBAR: Subjected to futility

According to Romans 8:20, the creation has been “subjected to futility”. This is a bad thing. But what does it mean?

As always, the first place (and the right place) to look is the Old Testament. The futility we now experience is a direct result of the curse of God in Genesis 3. Adam sinned; God responded in judgement. Because we shared Adam’s sin (Rom 5:12-21), we share in suffering judgement. Yes, God has dealt with this judgement in the Lord Jesus and his death for sin. But we will never experience relief from futility and suffering in this life. Look at these Old Testament passages to understand why:

- Genesis 3:14-19

- Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

- Ecclesiastes 3:9-15 (especially v. 14)

Some words about ‘groanings too deep for words’

“Groanings too deep for words” (Rom 8:26). It’s an emotion-laden term, and many have assumed that they know what it means by comparing it with their own experience of not knowing what to pray for—perhaps weeping, perhaps literally groaning, perhaps simply remaining in silence before God. Some have even linked the expression to some type of speaking in tongues—even though Paul mentions tongues nowhere else in his letter.

You will need to make up your own mind about how plausible some of these ideas are as you read the passage. But here are a few thoughts and observations to kick on with.

Paul warns us in the passage that these Spirit-inspired groanings are “too deep for words”. However, it’s not that words are *absent* from our groans. Rather, it’s that words are not fully capable of expressing the depth of our suffering, or the suffering of the whole of this creation. That’s hardly surprising. Our groaning, and the groaning of creation, is very deep groaning. But it’s not groaning that is completely out of reach of our understanding.

A further thought. We already know from Romans 8:22 that not just humans but the whole of creation has been groaning and waiting. Waiting for what? Answer: the revealing of God’s kingdom and with it, the sons of God (us!) in all their (our!) glory (Rom 8:23). So if we groan, we are groaning the Lord’s Prayer. In a nutshell, we are groaning, “Your kingdom come, your will be done”.

Now if people didn't have God's Holy Spirit at work in them, would they pray such a prayer? Would they long eagerly for God to judge the world and to reveal who are his "sons" (those who trust him)—and in the process, reveal those who aren't? Not likely! We already know from the first half of this chapter that we would pray no such thing. By nature we are enemies of God, hating what the Spirit loves.

If we didn't have God's Spirit, we would certainly not pray for God to be honoured.

If we didn't have God's Spirit, we would certainly not pray for his kingdom to come.

And we definitely wouldn't beg that he would forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

God's Holy Spirit makes all the difference to what we pray. He joins our words to the wordless groans of this creation, and makes it possible for us to pray that God would bring his kingdom to this world.

Read Romans 8:26-30.

6. If someone has the Holy Spirit, how will they be helped in their groaning?

7. What reassurances do these verses give to you, if and when you groan?

There's been a great deal in the first half of Paul's letter to the Romans that could give cause or dread concerning our future: the horrifying depth of our sin; the overwhelming reality of our personal guilt; the terror of God's anger against our sin.

On the other hand, we have seen and experienced the grace of God in the cross of Christ. We've been saved, justified, reconciled, and sanctified. We've been set free from the law. We've received God's Holy Spirit.

But can we be confident that God's grace will carry us through to the very end?

SIDEBAR: P is for Predestination

Sooner or later in the Christian life we come up against the concept of 'predestination'—the notion that God chooses us to be his and makes us his own even before we have any say in it. Verses 29-30 force us to confront such an idea head on, as indeed will Romans 9.

Let's hold over any objections to the idea of predestination to their proper place in study 6. Here, it is enough to see that God does indeed predestine us, according to both verses 29 and 30. This 'choosing ahead' means much more than simply foreseeing what we will decide concerning God, and confirming that choice. (The idea of God's 'foreknowing' is a separate concept, also taught here in verse 29.)

Notice how Paul uses the idea of predestination to comfort and strengthen us concerning the love, care, power, goodwill and generosity of God. Could God ever let us fall from his kindness? Is it possible that somehow God does not have our best interests at heart? No, not at all. Look closely at the verses in the final section of Romans 8 to see how the goodness of God carries us on to glory.

8. Considering the whole of Romans up to this point, what confidence can we have that verses 26-30 are true? (Answer from wherever in Romans you like, but you may want to refer specifically to Romans 1:4, 16-17; 3:21-26; 4:20-25; 5:1-11; 8:1-4.)

9. What good purpose does God work out of any situation, even the most difficult? How are these verses helpful in comforting Christians who suffer?

Read Romans 8:31-39.

10. Make a list of things that might cause us to imagine that God is against us. What items on the list do you find particularly relevant or striking?

11. Why is it possible to be confident in the face of all these threats?

Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- How does Romans 8 prepare you for suffering?
- How would you use Romans 8 to answer someone who said that it was not God's will for you to suffer, but to live in health and wealth and prosperity?
- Think about the difference between Christian hope and the hope that non-Christians have. What is the difference (cf. 1 Thess 4:13-18)? How could this insight be useful for evangelism?
- How does Romans 8 strengthen you for the Christian walk?
- How does Romans 8 change how you pray and what you pray for?

Give thanks and pray

- Thank God that nothing can separate us from his love.
- Pray that God's kingdom will come.
- What else does this passage prompt you to give thanks and pray for?

The next study: what is going on?

Right through Romans, Paul has been referring back to God's Old Testament laws and promises. This is crucial for his argument at every step of the way, because Paul's concern from the very beginning has been to explain the righteousness of God (Rom 1:17). But the only way to show God's righteousness is by showing how faithful he's been to his own character as revealed in his promises. Those promises are found in the Old Testament, and start at the very beginning—that is, in Genesis.

When we get to Romans 9-11, we reach a defence of God's righteousness. If Paul fails in this defence, it means that his whole argument up to this point is undermined. And in this section, to make his case he relies heavily on the teaching of the Old Testament. In particular, he makes reference to the stories of Abraham and his descendants in Genesis and the early chapters of Exodus, and uses their stories as proof positive of the justice and sovereignty of God, working together with his mercy and grace.

That means that if we don't know what's going on in the early books of the Bible, we will really struggle in this section of Romans.

So in order to get the full impact of Paul's arguments, we're going to do something a bit unusual in our next study. We're going to rewind to the early sections of the Bible—not the *very* beginning, but the bit that comes after the very beginning, starting with an astounding promise that God makes to a moon-worshipper by the name of Abraham.

If you can read at least some of the story ahead of time, you will be doing yourself and your group a great favour. Read Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6; along with Genesis 17-18 and 24-25. If you are a speed reader and you have a spare wet Saturday afternoon, why not read all the way through from Genesis 12 to Exodus 12!

STUDY 5

Sand and stars

The big story so far

As we signalled at the end of last study, we're going to take a big step away from Romans, and spend some time in the Old Testament. Why?

Paul has been explaining, since the very beginning of his letter, that in the gospel “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith” (Rom 1:17). He has explained that because God is a righteous God who is perfectly righteous in character, it follows that he always does the right thing, all the time. His righteousness is shown first in creation, then in the Law of Moses, and then supremely in the cross of Christ. Here at the cross God's righteous demands are satisfied, and at the same time he righteously keeps his promises to show mercy to his people. He does this by freely declaring us righteous, despite the punishment we deserve. Jesus takes this punishment in our place.

Which raises, for the thoughtful reader, some really important questions regarding God's promises.

Every single thing Paul has said relies on what God has promised. So, what exactly did he promise? Where in the Old Testament do we discover the terms of these promises? And in particular, given the pressing issues that Paul is about to address in Romans 9-11, is it possible to *lose* what was promised? These questions—and the last one in particular—are not just hair-splitting academic debates. When Paul writes and even up to the present time, many Jews seem to have missed out on what was promised to them.

If so, the shadowy but even more important question lurks close behind: If people can lose what God promises, then *is God really righteous?*

We ask these questions now because Paul himself brings these issues to the fore. In Romans 9 Paul discusses his fellow Jews, to whom 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... *it is not as though the word of God has failed*” (Rom 9:4-6).

He then dives into the Old Testament to prove how powerful, righteous and merciful God's word is. That is where we now follow him, beginning with Abraham (who is still called 'Abram' at this point in Genesis).

Read Genesis 12:1-3.

1. What has God promised to do for Abram and his descendants?

2. What must Abram and those associated with him do in order to receive a blessing from God?

Read Genesis 15:1-6.

3. What does God promise Abram in this passage?

SIDEBAR: Heroes or zeroes?

Abram (later renamed 'Abraham' by God) is a hero of faith, but his human and fallible side is now on display in Genesis as well. His plotting and scheming sound like something out of a daytime TV soap opera. He tries to pass his wife Sarah off as his sister, reasoning that a powerful king will be less likely to see him as an enemy if Sarah is seen as a potential bride. He does this not once but twice. And, when he knows that blessing is going to come to his sons, he attempts to manipulate circumstances in a way that *ensures* the blessing is delivered, even if it means having children by women other than his first wife. And so on.

The point of this character study? The more you read the story of the Old Testament heroes of faith, the more you realize that every single one of them points not to their own shining accomplishments but to the patience, goodness, kindness, mercy and *righteousness* of God.

4. On what basis is Abram counted righteous? (Recall Romans 4, especially v. 13.)

5. The following table traces through the history of God's promise (the word normally used is 'covenant', which means 'contract' or 'agreement') to Abraham and his descendants. Fill in the table, noting who receives the promise (that is, who God makes his covenant with) and what conditions (if any) apply. The first line has been filled in as an example.

Passage	Recipient of promise	Conditions (if any)
Genesis 12:1-3	Abram (Abraham)	Go! (v. 1)
Genesis 17:1-21		
Exodus 19:1-6		
Exodus 24:3-8		
Exodus 34:1-28		
Leviticus 26:40-46 (skim the whole chapter to get context)		
Deuteronomy 7:6-16		
2 Samuel 7:8-16 (cf. Ps 89:3)		

But wait! There's more!

This brief survey of passages only begins to scratch the surface of what the Old Testament says about the covenant (the word 'testament' is itself another word for 'covenant', so that the Bible really is divided into the 'Old Covenant' and the 'New Covenant'). Much of it consists of the prophets of Israel rebuking Israel and warning of God's judgement for people's failure to keep their side of the deal.

Alongside this are God's promises not to give up on his purposes, even if it is going to mean creating a new covenant—which it will! (See, for example, Isa 42:6, 61:8-9; Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 37:26.) We don't need to look at these prophetic passages in detail here, beyond noting that they are there and they matter for understanding why Jesus had to come, to offer a new beginning and a final solution for human sin.

The main point is this: when God speaks in Genesis 12 he is establishing a relationship *that he will never give up on*. It is a relationship that has been marred by sin, disobedience, judgement and death, to be sure. But it is also a relationship that God,

through the word of his prophets, returns to, reaffirms and builds on through the history of the Old Testament.

So let's reflect on what the passages we've considered teach us about our relationship to God.

6. Looking at the passages in the table above, what do they teach about God's:

a. power?

b. grace (i.e. generosity, unmerited kindness)?

c. justice (i.e. 'righteousness')?

7. Looking at the passages in the table above, what do they suggest about humanity's ability to help themselves gain blessing?

8. What problems will Israel's disobedience to the covenant cause for:

a. them?

b. God?

9. The promises are made to Abraham and his descendants. If you are not Jewish:

a. Is there any hope in these covenant promises for you? What?

b. Is there any warning in these covenant promises for you? What?

STUDY 6

Can God keep a promise?

Romans 9

If there's one thing that Romans drives home again and again, it's that God is righteous and we're not. So when the gospel reveals the righteousness of God (Rom 1:17), there's one thing we know for sure: God's declaration that we are justified (that is, "declared righteous") can only ever happen through his sheer grace, mercy and generosity, and not through any work of our own.

But wait! Didn't God make certain promises to the children of Abraham, the Jews? And haven't we now discovered that the Jews appear to have missed out on these promises, and rejected God's chosen Messiah?

The problem here is that it all seems a little bit too much like promising a shiny new bike to a child for Christmas that doesn't arrive. The bike is promised. The child is delighted. However, the lead-up to Christmas is extremely difficult, with lots of tension between parents and children. When Christmas day finally arrives: no bike.

Even the worst parent with the most mischievous child will recognize that there is something seriously askew with promising a Christmas present that doesn't turn up.

But is this what God has done to the Jews? Read on.

Read Romans 9:1-5.

1. Why is Paul so upset concerning his fellow Jews?

Read Romans 9:6-13.

2. Why might a Jewish reader of the Old Testament suggest that God's word had failed?

3. What is at stake if God's word *has* failed?

4. How does Paul answer the charge that God's word has failed?

Paul continues to insist that God is absolutely true to his promises. We can trust him, despite the (apparent) failure of the Jewish people. We have now considered Paul's response to this charge against God's goodness, and seen how the failure of some Jews can be understood without calling God a liar or calling his righteousness into question.

Nonetheless, mysteries and uncertainties remain. Why do some sinners respond by trusting him? Why do some reject him? Again, questions of God's power, and the way he chooses to exercise it, arise to trouble us. Even though God is true to his promises, is there some deeper unfairness that is suggested by the fact that not all receive the blessing of God? This is the problem Paul now turns his attention to.

Read Romans 9:14-18.

5. Summarize Paul's argument about how God chooses people to belong to him. (Also see '**Who hardened Pharaoh's heart?**' in the sidebar.)

SIDEBAR: Who hardened Pharaoh's heart?

Paul reminds his readers of the story of the Exodus, where God's servant Moses was sent to lead the descendants of Abraham out of captivity in Egypt. Pharaoh refused to let them go, time and again "hardening his heart" against God (the story is in Exodus 1-15). The result was punishment for Pharaoh and the people of Egypt.

But why did Pharaoh resist? When you read through the story of Pharaoh's hardhearted refusal to let God's people go, God's sovereignty is clearly seen at work—and that is Paul's point. God is spoken of as hardening Pharaoh's heart nine times (see Exod 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). Four times it is not clear who is responsible ("Pharaoh's heart was hardened" in Exod 7:13; see also Exod 8:19; 9:7, 35).

Yet at one and the same time, the Exodus narrative makes it plain that Pharaoh's decision was not robotic or mechanical in any way. In line with this, we read that it is Pharaoh *himself* who hardened his heart (Exod 8:15, 32; 9:34).

The Bible places these statements side by side (God decides; yet Pharaoh decides), and invites us to treat both as true, without further explanation.

6. Do you think Paul's argument is a *satisfying* answer to the question in verse 14? How do you respond to it?

Paul has moved from the basic standpoint of God's fundamental faithfulness and truthfulness, to consider the deep truths of God's glory and compassion. Speaking bluntly, a paraphrase of Paul's argument here could be: 'It's not all about you!' We might fondly imagine that we are the central and most important part of any plan and action that God undertakes. Here, Paul brings us back to earth with a jolt. God and his glory matter more than us!

Yet faced with God's absolute power, it is easy for sinful and selfish minds to raise still more objections. Let's consider one of the big ones.

Read Romans 9:19-29.

7. Summarize Paul's response to the objection of verse 19.

8. What do verses 19-29 teach about God's:

a. kingship?

b. justice?

c. mercy?

Read Romans 9:30-33.

9. What does Paul conclude about:

• the Jews?

• us?

- God?

- Jesus?

SIDEBAR: Two witnesses to God's character

Both Hosea and Isaiah lived and prophesied in the eighth century BC, and both had messages of terrible judgement on Israel. They also promised that God would rescue for himself people who were not Israelites as well.

By quoting both prophets at this stage of his argument, Paul is able to undercut any suggestion that God has not stayed true to his own character and promises. How? Because both prophets have taught that God was always going to be just and judge sin, whether it was the sin of Israel or the sin of another nation. So the present failure of some Jews, whilst horrifying, is no basis at all for suggesting that God has not done the right thing. Hosea and Isaiah saw this failure coming, and prophesied accordingly.

Not only this, but wondrously for Paul's non-Jewish readers, Isaiah and Hosea taught that God was always going to show love and mercy, not just to one nation but to the whole of creation—yes, even the Gentiles.

'But I thought it was all about me!'

Here is some bad news. It's not.

Asked to summarize the message of Christianity, many Christians will almost automatically begin by talking about human need. "This world is a mess," we say, "and our lives are characterized by pain, despair, depression and meaninglessness". We then move on to talk about God as the answer to our existential problems. "Inside each of us is a God-shaped hole. Until we find God," we explain, "we will continue to struggle to find meaning and fulfilment."

As true as this may be, Romans 9 (and the whole of Romans) is a sharp reminder that the gospel is first of all news about God, *not* news about us. As we read of God showing his power "that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth", we come to understand that something greater is at stake than any 'God-shaped hole', and that is the glory of the Lord. That's one of the ideas that comes out of Romans 9. So let's explore some of the implications.

STUDY 7

The righteousness of god

Romans 10

The Jewish story as recorded in the Old Testament seems to be a story of continual failure. This is especially so when we come to the New Testament and discover that the leaders of the Jews, together with the Romans, reject Jesus out of hand and assist in putting him to death.

How serious is the Jewish failure? What can we learn from them about our own response to the gospel? In this chapter Paul reflects on the apparent fate of the Jewish nation.

Read Romans 10:1-4.

1. According to what Paul says here, in what way have the Jews got it right?

2. How have the Jews failed to understand righteousness?

3. In what ways do the non-Jews fall into the same trap as the Jews? (Refer back to Romans 1-3 to help answer this question, especially 1:16-18, 2:1-2 and 3:9-20.)

Read Romans 10:5-13, and compare with Deuteronomy 30:11-20.

4. In explaining the Deuteronomy passage, what piece of information has Paul added that was not immediately obvious when reading Deuteronomy for the first time?

5. Why is this information so significant?

6. How does Paul's additional information show that the Jewish way of obtaining righteousness is wrong?

7. What does this passage teach us about:

a. how we should **interpret and apply the law** of Moses (cf. 2 Cor 1:20)?

b. how we can get right with God?

SIDEBAR: Religious yes; but are you right with God?

Romans 10 is, among other things, a stern warning against complacency, and an encouragement to look for the truth about God in the right place. Religiosity and zeal by themselves are useless in getting right with God. If they were of any value, then certainly the Jews would have been in good relationship with their Lord. Obedience to the law would have helped, but only if it had been kept perfectly in every way. It wasn't.

In the same way, even Christianized religious rituals such as baptism, confirmation, the Lord's Supper and related ceremonies may well be observed to the letter, but they won't do anything to make us right with God. Here Paul makes perfectly clear what we have to do: Listen to the word of the gospel and respond. As you answer question 7, pay careful attention to what exactly it is that we are called on to believe about the Lord Jesus.

On the value, or otherwise, of religious ritual, you might consider some of the following passages:

- Isaiah 1:13-17
- Jeremiah 7:9-10
- Psalms 40:6, 51:16-17
- Colossians 2:16-23

In the next few verses, Romans 10:14-17, Paul quotes Isaiah 52:7 and Isaiah 53:1. These verses are well worth checking in the context of Isaiah 52-53, if you haven't already done so. Isaiah's dismal job is to tell the people of Israel a message about God that they are unwilling to hear. The focus of this rejection is none other than the 'servant' spoken of several times by Isaiah—not only in Isaiah 52-53, but also Isaiah 41:8-42:9, 44:1-5, 44:21-28 and 49:1-6. Although appointed by God to announce his salvation and rescue, the servant is rejected and spurned. (For more on this, see the sidebar '**The story of Isaiah and Israel**'.) Paul now applies all this to the present situation of Israel and the way they have responded to the gospel of grace.

SIDEBAR: The story of Isaiah and Israel

Isaiah is a frightening and a glorious book. It begins with Israel, Jerusalem in particular, in total disarray: hypocrisy in worship, full of murder and exploitation. So bad is it that in Isaiah 6, the book appears to begin again, for a new beginning is exactly what is required in Israel. Isaiah is given a vision of God in his temple, and the prophet realizes that even he, Isaiah, is loaded down with sin. God's words are words of comfort and horror. He deals with Isaiah's sin. Then the Lord God gives him a message to take to Israel that they will refuse to hear: if they did hear it, says God, they might repent! Rather God, in his mysterious yet just plan, declares that Israel's heart will be hardened against her Lord. In the New Testament in Mark 4, this terrible message is taken up by Jesus regarding his own ministry.

Yet there is hope. And in the later parts of Isaiah (including the sections Paul quotes in Romans 9, 10 and 11), God says that he is going to restore Jerusalem and Israel, through the work of his chosen servant, so that it will become the centre of a glorious new creation.

In Acts 13:46-47, Paul is bold enough to take the language of the 'servant', previously referring to Isaiah and to Jesus, and apply it to his own preaching mission! The work of the 'servant' who proclaims God to Israel and on to the nations doesn't end in the ministry of Jesus, but continues on into the rest of the New Testament. Does it continue still further? Certainly it does—but just how far it continues, you will need to work out, as you continue to read and pray through this part of Romans.

Read Romans 10:14-17.

8. Summarize Paul's answer to the questions he raises in verse 14.

9. Bearing in mind Isaiah's words, what responses can we expect if we "preach the good news"?

Read Romans 10:18-21.

10. How is it possible that people have already heard the gospel without a preacher (cf. Ps 19:1-4; Rom 1:18-20)?

11. From verses 19-21:

a. Is God's invitation to Israel still open?

b. What response is he expecting?

12. How would you answer someone who complained, "God's treatment of the Jews shows that he lacks mercy"?

Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- How is the history of Israel a warning for us (cf. 1 Cor 10:6)?

- "My religion is a private religion. I don't like to force it on others, and I don't like people who force it on me." What answers can you give to a person who says this? Consider especially Romans 10:14-17.

- What positive reasons for telling people the gospel of Jesus come out of Romans 10?

Give thanks and pray

- Thank God that he has revealed *true* religion to us in Jesus Christ.
- Pray that your feet will be the feet of a preacher.

STUDY 8

What—leftovers?

Romans 11

The more we learn of the gospel of God and his righteousness revealed in Jesus, the more we realize that this gospel is not first and foremost about us, but about God and his glory. Many of the people of Israel failed to understand that God, not them, was at the heart of the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection, and paid the ultimate price.

So how should we think of Israel now? And just as significantly, what attitude should we learn from seeing how God has treated Israel? What will it mean in this context for us to realize that the gospel is first and foremost not about us, but about God and his glory? And is there a warning here for us?

Read Romans 11:1-10.

1. Summarize Paul's answer to his own question in Romans 11:1.

2. What will happen to those who know God's grace but reject it?

Read Romans 11:11-16.

3. What does Paul anticipate is going to happen to those who "stumble" (see especially vv. 11-12)?

4. How is it going to happen?

SIDEBAR: Spirits of stupors, snares and traps

In Romans 11, as we read about the stubborn heart of Israel, a disturbing theme keeps emerging. Paul tells us that God's sovereign hand is at work in bringing about (or at least allowing) this stubbornness of heart, which God subsequently judges. Why does God do it?

The short answer—and as you study the passage you can consider for yourself the long answer— is that in the words of the old saying “The Jews are like everybody else, only more so”. Just as we learned when we considered Pharaoh (study 6), the Jews must take responsibility for their own hardness of heart. Just like the whole of humanity, they (and we) are by nature liable to the judgement of God. That God hardens some in unbelief is an outworking of his justice and his sovereignty. What ought to surprise us and fill us with thanks, rather, is that God might graciously show his love, and have mercy on a multitude of believers through the work of his son Jesus. This grace is what is front and centre in Paul's mind. That's why Paul continues to explain God's plan and, by the time he has done so in this chapter, is able to end with a great song of praise!

Read Romans 11:17-24.

5. Is there a danger that you will stop being a Christian?

6. How would it happen, according to these verses?

7. How could it be prevented, according to these verses?

Read Romans 11:25-36.

8. Why has Israel rejected God?

9. What is God's ultimate plan?

10. What is Paul's response to God's plan?

SIDEBAR: Should we evangelize Israel?

One thing that becomes clear when we read this central section of Romans is that God hasn't finished with his people Israel. How could he have? He has promised great things to them, and he doesn't lie. Some Christians have argued that God's reputation is saved when we realize that the church—that is, those who have put their trust in Lord Jesus—have become the recipients of all of God's promises to Israel. Now while this is undoubtedly true, it's not enough to make sense of God's promises to Abraham and his descendants, and in particular it fails to do justice to this most important section of Paul's letter. God still has plans for the physical descendants of Israel, as he has plans for each and every one of us.

Do those plans include a massive turning back to God by the nation Israel? That's one of the questions to wrestle with as you read this passage. If the answer is yes, then it will happen (as Romans makes abundantly clear) only through the saving gospel of the Lord Jesus. So we should get on with telling our Jewish friends about their promised Messiah, Jesus, and pray accordingly.

But even if, on careful reading, you decide that the situation is slightly more ambiguous, so what? The only option clearly excluded is the idea that God has washed his hands of his own people. And if this is so, then any opportunity to talk to Jewish friends about Jesus is a good one, and we should pray and act accordingly.

Regardless, the plan of God that he be glorified as we bring the gospel to the world is one that everyone who loves Jesus, and is concerned for the righteousness of God, will want to be part of.

Right at the beginning of Romans, in chapter 1:16-17, Paul summarizes an idea that he will develop through the whole letter. In those two marvellous verses he declares that in the powerful gospel, which brings salvation to all, "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith".

Not once in the letter does Paul lose sight of the reality that, more than anything else, the gospel is given to show forth the righteousness and glory of God—with immense and immeasurable benefit for us, of course. But always, at the heart of the universe, is God's concern for his own glory and righteousness—a concern that is to be shared by each one of his creatures.

11. Thinking back over your study of Romans, how do you see the righteousness of God worked out:

- a. in Israel's history?

- b. in the gospel itself, and Paul's explanation of it?

Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- Think back over what you have learned from Romans so far. How does what you've read affect your confidence before God?
- How does what you've read affect what you know of God's character?
- How does what you've read affect what you pray for?
- How does what you've read affect your attitude to the how and why of evangelism?

Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for his kindness, his severity, and the unsearchable riches of his wisdom.
- Pray that our lives and our words will bring glory to God as we tell others of his righteousness.