very blessings which the Jews insisted were their national privilege—particularly being God’s sons and daughters (e.g., Exod. 4:22)—have been extended to anyone who follows Jesus.

Now in the second great section of the letter Paul will stress that the gospel is for the Jews first—i.e., the Jews still have a special place in God’s plan and, therefore, the Gentiles must not despise them.

Questions for reflection:

Would we rather live in a world where faith, hope, and self-sacrifice are possible or in a world where there is no need for these things? Can we imagine living in the second world if we had never lived in the first? At present, do we especially see the power of God in the endurance of those who are faithful in the midst of suffering? How might the experience of persecution change a person’s understanding of the Christian life?

30. Romans 9:1–5

_I am telling the truth in Christ; I am not lying; my conscience confirms this about me by the Holy Spirit. I have great sorrow and constant pain in my heart. I would wish myself to be an anathema to Christ for the sake of my brothers and sisters, my kin by blood. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the Law and the cult and the promises. Theirs are the Patriarchs, and from their blood is the Messiah. He is God over all to be blessed forever. Amen._ (9:1–5)

Paul begins the second half of Romans by emphasizing that the failure of most Jews to accept the gospel is distressing to him personally. Paul is emphatic. The disbelief of so many Jews is a source of constant pain. Indeed, he claims that he
would be willing to forfeit his own salvation if only his Jewish kin would accept Christ.

It is striking that Paul feels the need to insist that he is telling the truth. Today when we read the epistle, we have no reason to question Paul’s sincerity. It seems natural that a missionary who was himself ethnically Jewish would be especially burdened when his Jewish compatriots refused to become Christians. Yet, Paul stresses twice that he is not lying and goes on to declare that his conscience agrees.

The only plausible explanation for these protestations is that some Jewish Christians at Rome and, probably, elsewhere felt that Paul did not care if his preaching was hurting efforts to convert Jews. In his preaching Paul was telling the Gentiles that they could inherit the privileges of being Jewish without having to adopt the Jewish law, including circumcision. Naturally, many Jews in the Christian movement resented this message. It was blurring the lines between Jews and Gentiles and could easily lead Christian Jews to stop observing the Law. Indeed, the Acts of the Apostles tells us that in Jerusalem there was a false rumor that Paul was actually encouraging Jews to forsake their heritage (Acts 21:21). Consequently, Paul was giving Christianity a bad reputation among Jews and thus hindering efforts by other Christian missionaries to convert them. Apparently, at least some Christian Jews at Rome and, presumably, in other places as well felt that Paul was unconcerned. Consequently, Paul emphasizes that the Church’s lack of success in converting Jews is painful to him personally.

Of course, by stressing his concern for Jewish Christianity, Paul is courting the support of his Jewish readers at Rome and any other Jewish Christians who would subsequently hear about this letter. They would be especially moved by Paul’s account of how much he suffers when he remembers that many of his natural brothers and sisters are rejecting the Christian message.

Paul then stresses that by right Christianity belongs to the Jews first. Not only did the Jews produce the heritage which ultimately led to Christianity; in addition, Jesus himself was Jewish by blood. It is striking that here Paul emphasizes that the
Jews are especially entitled to the privileges which only a few verses earlier he insisted are the inheritance of Gentile Christians. Earlier he told his readers that they had inherited the promises made to Abraham and even had been glorified and become God children by adoption (8:29–30). Now he insists that by right this adoption and glory belong to the Jews first.

To balance the assertion that Jesus was Jewish by his human origin, Paul quickly adds that, of course, Jesus is also “God over all.” Some scholars have tried to resist the conclusion that here Paul flatly declares that Jesus is God and have rendered the Greek differently. Nevertheless, careful study has demonstrated that the most natural way to render the Greek is that Jesus is “God over all.” Moreover, after Paul has so clearly stressed the Jewishness of the human Jesus and thereby pleased his Jewish readers, he must temper this assertion with the reflection that the risen Lord is God of Gentiles as well. Elsewhere Paul does not hesitate to attribute to Christ divine authority over all things (e.g., Phil. 2:9–11).

**Questions for reflection:**

Do you feel that Christianity should be for the Jews first? Does the failure of Jews to believe puzzle or threaten us? If so, how does this discomfort make us treat Jews? What are the implications of saying that Jesus who was a member of a particular ethnic group is also God over all?

✉ ✺ ✿

**31. Romans 9:6–13**

*But it is not as though God’s word has proven unreliable. Not all those who are from Israel [i.e., Jacob] are Israelites. Nor are all of Abraham’s descendants the true children. But, “through Isaac children will be called forth for you” [Gen. 21:12]. This means that the children by blood are not God’s children, but the*
children by promise will be considered his descendants. Because this was the promise, “At this season I will come back, and Sarah will have a son” [Gen. 18:14]. That is not all. Rebecca had intercourse with one man, Isaac our forefather. When her children had not yet been born or done anything good or bad, in order that God’s plan might continue to be realized through his choice, not though human deeds but his summons, she was told, “The older shall serve the younger” [Gen. 25:23]. Just as it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” [Mal. 1:2–3]. (9:6–13)

After admitting that the Jews as a whole are not presently accepting the gospel, Paul must stress that nevertheless God’s plan has not failed. For Paul and his first readers it would have been blasphemous even to suggest that God could fail to accomplish his will.

Paul points out that in the past God accomplished his plan by choosing some people rather than others and implies that God is continuing to act this way in the present. Both Esau and Jacob were sons of Isaac, but God selected only Jacob to be part of the chosen people, the Jews. So too, Paul implies, God in the present is choosing only a few Jews to be part of his new chosen people, the Church.

Partly in order to protect God’s sovereignty, Paul stresses that human merit did not decide which people God chose. If God’s choice merely reflected human goodness, then people would determine what God did. As a monotheist, Paul finds such a conclusion unacceptable. God is creator and redeemer, and he is the one who initiates and acts. Human beings merely respond. Consequently, Paul insists that everything depends on God’s summons, not human achievement. Jacob and Esau were twins, and Esau was even the elder and so by law had the privilege of being the heir. Of course, prior to their births, neither had a chance to make any moral decisions. Yet when they were still in the womb, God chose Jacob.

By stressing the initiative of God, Paul lays the groundwork for his subsequent claim that the unbelieving Jews are not to be greatly blamed for their lack of faith. If it is God who gives faith to
one person and not to another, then lack of faith is not necessarily a sign of sin. Later Paul will argue that the Jews who do not accept the gospel nevertheless still have a zeal for God (Rom. 10:2).

Of course, by stressing the initiative of God in giving faith, Paul is also telling his Gentile readers that they are in no position to boast. Their own faith is God’s gift and does not imply that they are somehow more deserving than others. Accordingly, instead of boasting, the Gentiles should praise God for his special mercy to them.

The claim that there is no easy correlation between faith and virtue seems especially helpful today. Christians are increasingly engaging in interfaith dialogue not only with Jews, but also with many religions and philosophies. Such dialogue generally makes it obvious that many loving, wise, and informed people do not find the claims of Christianity convincing. Hence, Paul’s insistence that God gives faith only to some people and not to others and that lack of faith is not necessarily a symptom of sin is very useful in contemporary Christian life.

Questions for reflection:

Is your own faith due to your goodness, or is it simply a gift? In your experience are people who believe in Christianity necessarily more righteous than those who do not? What would people who are devout members of other religions gain by believing in the Christian message? What would we personally lose if we adopted some other religion or philosophy?

32. Romans 9:14–29

So what shall we say? Is God unjust? Certainly not. Because he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I choose. I will have compassion on whomever I wish” [Exod. 33:19]. So then everything depends not on what a human being desires or does

but on God who has mercy. For in scripture he says to Pharaoh, “It is for this very reason that I elevated you, that by you I might demonstrate my power and so that I might be proclaimed in the whole world” [cf. Exod 9:16]. So then he has mercy on those whom he wishes, and he makes obstinate those whom he wishes. (9:14–18)

Now you will say to me, “Why does he still find fault, because who has resisted his will?” On the contrary, who are you, fellow, to talk back to God? Will what is molded say to the one who molded it, “Why did you make me like this?” Does not the potter have rights over the clay, to fashion from the same lump one vessel for honorable usage and another for dishonorable? What if God, wishing to demonstrate his indignation and make his power known, bore with great patience the rejected vessels which were created for destruction? What if he also wished to make known the abundance of his glory toward the vessels created for mercy, which he prepared beforehand for glory? (9:19–23)

We are those vessels whom he summoned not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles. As he also says in Hosea, “I will call those who are not my people ‘my people’ and she who was not beloved ‘beloved’” [Hos. 2:23]. “And in the passage where God said to them, ‘You are not my people’ there he will call them ‘sons and daughters of the life-giving God’” [Hos. 1:10]. Now Isaiah cries out about Israel, “If the number of the Israelites were as the sand by the sea, just a remnant will be preserved. For the Lord will make a swift end on the earth” [Isa. 10:22–23]. It is just as Isaiah predicted, “If the mighty Lord had not left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have resembled Gomorrah” [Isa. 1:9]. (9:24–29)

Paul now goes on to deal with two pressing theological problems. First, if God chooses to give faith to some people but not to others, then it seems he is being arbitrary. Yet, a cornerstone of biblical doctrine is that God is just. Second, if God is the one who decides how people will respond to his call, then it seems he is not in a position to condemn anyone. Yet,
another cornerstone of biblical doctrine is that God must judge the world. Earlier in the letter Paul simply dismissed the question of whether God could judge people whose wickedness demonstrated God’s own goodness. There Paul replied that, of course, God would judge the world (Rom. 3:5–6).

Paul attempts to solve these problems by insisting that God has an absolute right to deal with his creatures in whatever way he chooses. Just as a potter has the unquestionable right to make different vessels and use them as he wishes, so too God has the right to create human beings, assign them different roles, and be relatively merciful to some and not to others.

The fact that Paul can insist that God has such rights demonstrates once again his passion for monotheism. Today most Westerners, whether religious or not, are essentially humanists. The primary question in philosophy or in social planning is what is most helpful to human beings. Similarly, we determine whether or not religious ideas are true largely on the basis of whether or not they promote the welfare of people. Paul had a very different perspective. For him the primary question was how to give ourselves fully to God’s service and let him use us to bring the world into submission to its creator and redeemer. The right of God to do as he chooses is assumed.

It is striking, however, that even when Paul insists that God is not accountable to human judgment, he also insists on God’s overriding mercy. When Paul considers the hypothetical possibility that God may have created certain people for destruction, Paul stresses that even so God bore them “with great patience.”

In fact, it appears that the only thing Paul was really arguing for when he emphasizes that God did not choose some people is that God gives to some people inferior historical roles to play; Paul stops short of clearly teaching that God predestines some people for eternal perdition. In the past God chose Pharaoh to play the villain, and by sending plagues on him and his country, God demonstrated his power. In the present God is giving only some people the glorious summons to believe in Christ. Paul limits himself to discussing how God acts in
history and does not say that God will arbitrarily send anyone to hell. On the contrary, earlier Paul wrote that in the past God chose to ignore sins (3:25–26) and later Paul will insist that God ultimately plans to have mercy on everyone (see below).

Here Paul stresses that his Christian readers should see themselves as people to whom God has been especially merciful and should respond accordingly. To us, God has made known the depth of his mercy. We did nothing to deserve the gift of faith. Nothing we can do will make us deserving of the indescribable gift of salvation. Yet, God was pleased to bestow both upon us. Surely then, we should not be arrogant or judgmental but instead be full of gratitude and charitable towards those who have not, as of yet, been similarly blessed.

In the course of this philosophical discussion about the ways of God, Paul, nevertheless, continues to emphasize the overall theme of the letter, namely that the gospel is for the Jews first and also for the Greeks. The Jewish scriptures show that the gospel is also for the Greeks because Hosea looked forward to a time when the Gentiles who were not the chosen people would become God’s people. Nevertheless, those same scriptures also make it clear that a remnant of the Jews will remain faithful to God. Yes, if God had not been merciful, Israel would have fared no better than Sodom and Gomorrah, which he utterly destroyed. But, of course, as Isaiah foresaw, God has been merciful. Hence, thanks to God’s summons, the Church consists of both Jews and Gentiles.

By appealing to the Old Testament theology that God always preserves a faithful remnant, Paul justifies further his claim that God’s plan has not failed. Throughout the Old Testament God allowed most Israelites to go astray. Yet he always kept a few faithful, and it was through them that he accomplished his saving plan. If God always acted this way in the past, the fact that only a few Jews are presently responding positively to the gospel does not mean that God has failed. On the contrary, God is acting the way he has always acted and will surely accomplish what he has set out to do.
Questions for reflection:

Does God in fact call different people to play different roles in history? If so, must God of necessity choose some people to play inferior or even negative roles? How should we who have the privilege of being called to be Christians look at ourselves? How should we look on others? Do we think of ourselves as people who have especially received God’s mercy? Is the church in the modern Western world only a remnant of what was once a Christian culture? If so, can we believe that nevertheless through us God is doing something fundamental for the culture as a whole?

33. Romans 9:30–10:13

What then shall we say? The Gentiles who did not strive for righteousness obtained righteousness—but the righteousness that comes from faith. But Israel who did strive for the law to achieve righteousness did not succeed in fulfilling the law. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith but by something like deeds. They stumbled on the stumbling block. It is just as it is written, “Look, I am placing a stone in Zion on which they will stumble and a rock on which they will fall” [cf. Isa. 8:14]. “Yet those who believe in him will not be put to shame” [Isa. 28:16].

Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God is for their salvation. I testify for them that they have a zeal for God, but not an informed one. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and seek to establish their own, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness. (9:30–10:3)

Christ is the goal of the law and makes everyone who believes become righteous. Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes through the law, “The person who does these things will find life through them” [Lev. 18:5]. But the righteousness that comes from faith speaks as follows, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” [Deut. 30:12] (that is to bring Christ down) or, “Who will descend into
the abyss?” (that is to bring Christ up from the dead). But what
does it say, “The word is near you. It is in your mouth and in
your mind” [Deut. 30:14], that is the word which we preach
about faith. Because if you declare with your mouth that Jesus is
Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the
dead, you will be saved. Belief in the heart leads to righteous-
ness, and declaration with the mouth leads to salvation. Scrip-
ture says, “Anyone who believes in him will not be put to
shame” [Isa. 28:16]. There is no distinction between Jew and
Greek, for all have the same Lord, and he is generous to all who
call on him, for “anyone who calls on the Lord will be saved”
[Joel 2:32]. (10:4-13)

Paul claims that at present Gentiles are achieving righteous-
ness through accepting the Christian message, whereas
most Jews are not. Many Gentiles are believing in the Christian
proclamation and through such belief are becoming righteous.
By contrast, the Jews on the whole are rejecting the Christian
faith and, as a result, are not even achieving the righteousness
that the Mosaic Law requires. Of course, from Paul’s perspec-
tive an essential part of that righteousness is believing in Jesus
since the Mosaic Law points forward to him.

Nevertheless, even as Paul stresses the present failure of
the Jews, he insists that they are not greatly to be blamed for
not believing the Christian message that was preached to them.
Their fall was God’s will. The scriptures predicted the Jews
would stumble. Moreover, Paul himself testifies that they have
a zeal for God. Paul stresses again that he deeply desires the
conversion of his compatriots. His prayer for them is that they
will be saved.

Of course, by stressing that his readers should not despise
the Jews, Paul is hoping to win the good will of his Jewish
readers at Rome and any other Jewish Christians who might
hear about the letter. They would appreciate the positive
remarks about their compatriots, especially since in the an-
cient world all Jews—whether Christian or not—suffered rid-
icule and discrimination.
Nevertheless, a new era has dawned because Jesus has become incarnate and risen from the dead. On our own, of course, we were powerless to inaugurate an epoch of grace. We could not go up to heaven to bring Christ down; we could not raise him from the dead. But what we could not do, God has done. Since Jesus came down from heaven, he was not subject to the sin that was passed on from Adam to the present. Since Jesus has risen from the dead, he is Lord the universe and is changing it.

In line with the theme of the letter as a whole, Paul insists that in this new era the only way to salvation—even for the Jews—is the acceptance of the Christian message. The Jewish law points forward to Jesus who offers salvation through his death and resurrection. People who trust in this offer receive a new power that enables them to act righteously. By contrast, the Jews who seek to fulfill the Law without following Jesus do not even succeed in keeping the Law. Jesus is Lord of all, and salvation comes from calling on him. Hence, Paul can write that there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile.

As we have seen, earlier in the letter Paul explained why it is impossible to do what is right without accepting the message about Jesus. Because of previous sin, human beings are necessarily enslaved to wrongdoing before they know Christ, and, hence, cannot perform all the actions that the Mosaic Law requires. Moreover, Paul, like Jesus, insists that the Mosaic Law, properly interpreted, not only requires us to act in a certain way but also to overcome obsessive thoughts and desires. Such inner righteousness can never be achieved merely by trying to follow the Law. Moreover, to the extent we can fulfill the Law’s demands on our own power, we become proud, and this pride further alienates us from God.

True righteousness only comes through accepting God’s unimaginable grace. While we were undeserving sinners, Christ’s willingly died for us to demonstrate God’s unfathomable love. When we accept that love, we trust in Jesus in our hearts and praise him with our mouths. Such trust and praise deliver us from self-centeredness and allow us to receive the Holy Spirit,
which is the very mind of God. Through the transforming power that the Spirit gives, we become righteous.

By emphasizing that now both Jews and Greeks achieve salvation in the same way, Paul is implicitly inviting both groups in the Roman Church to unite and support him. Despite their divisions, both ethnic factions at Rome were part of the same urban church and, we must assume, both wished to be one and were merely searching for a satisfactory means to do so. Paul’s stress that there is a single route to salvation would have appealed to all and made Paul a reconciler. Of course, if the congregation looked on Paul as a helpful reconciler, it would be more inclined to give him the support he needed for his future missionary work.

Questions for reflection:

Do we as Christians see ourselves as living in a different historical context than non-Christians? Does this context give us power to overcome racial and ethnic divisions and live as a single community in Christ? Should we be critical of people who do not live in our historical context?

34. Romans 10:14–15

How will people call on him in whom they have not believed, and how will they believe in him to whom they did not listen? And how will they listen without someone preaching? But how will people preach unless they are sent out? As it is written, “How lovely are the feet of those who proclaim good tidings!” [Isa. 52:7]. (10:14–15)

Paul stresses that unbelievers cannot accept the Christian message unless they hear it. For Paul the Christian message is not a set of timeless ideas about the nature of the God or the universal qualities of human beings. Timeless ideas can, at least
theoretically, be found on one's own. Through meditation or experience, different individuals can independently discover universal truths. The Christian message that Paul proclaimed, however, is primarily about how God acted in history by sending his Son to save human beings. Christ existed before he was born and chose to enter the fallen realm of sin and death; there he was crucified and then rose from the dead. Such information can never be discovered on one's own. Instead, someone must tell us about it.

Because salvation comes from believing in Jesus, and we cannot believe in Jesus before someone tells us about him, the Christian missionary has a vital role. Someone must bring the good news. Hence, Paul stresses what a blessing it is when people preach the gospel.

To be a missionary, however, one must have a commission from God. Paul stresses that the missionary must be sent. Missionaries are servants of Jesus, and they can only fulfill this role if Jesus himself invites them to preach.

By stressing the importance of the commissioned missionary, Paul is in part preparing for his coming appeal for financial and logistical help. Paul, of course, was a Christian missionary, and, as he reminded us at the beginning of the letter, he had a commission from God (1:1). Later in the letter he will ask the Roman congregation to support him in his mission to Spain. Hence, the praise of the missionary vocation at this point in the epistle lays a foundation for his subsequent requests.

Questions for reflection:

Do contemporary Christians often want to make Christianity a set of timeless ideas rather than a statement of what God did by becoming a human being? What are the advantages of religions that are primarily a set of timeless truths? What is the advantage of believing that God became a human being and died and rose?

How are missionaries today like Paul, and how are they different? How do missionaries help "heathen" cultures?
How can missionaries sometimes hurt the people to whom they go? How can missionaries tell if they have a commission from God?

35. Romans 10:16–21

But not all accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who believed what we preached?” [Isa. 53:1]. Hence, faith comes from preaching, and preaching comes from the message about Christ. But I say, “They did not all hear, did they?” On the contrary, “Their voice has gone out into the entire world and their words to the ends of the earth” [Psal. 19:4]. (10:16–18)

But I say, Israel understood, did it not? To begin with, Moses says, “I will make you jealous of what is not even a nation. By an ignorant nation I will provoke you to anger” [Deut. 32:21]. And Isaiah boldly says, “I was found by those who did not seek me. I revealed myself to those who did not inquire about me” [Isa. 65:1]. But about Israel he says, “All day I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people” [Isa. 65:2]. (10:19–21)

As he prepares to emphasize that the Jews will be saved despite their present lack of faith, Paul stresses that their temporary rejection of the gospel was part of God’s plan. The prophet Isaiah predicted it.

Nevertheless, Paul claims that the Jews are still somehow culpable. Indeed, they have no excuse, especially since Christian missionaries have preached the gospel so widely. The Jews have heard the message; they have understood it; yet in response they are being “disobedient” and “contrary.” Paul, like various Old Testament writers, believes that God can foresee human sinfulness and incorporate it into his saving purposes. Such divine mercy, however, does not excuse transgression.
The reason Paul stresses that the Jews are at least partly to blame for rejecting the gospel is that he wishes to insist that salvation depends on God’s mercy to sinners. For Paul salvation must be a gift; otherwise we could brag. Consequently, as he will stress later, all must be culpably disobedient so that God may grant mercy to everyone (11:32).

Questions for reflection:

Do you think that the people you know who reject the Christian message are being “contrary” or merely have not yet received God’s “call”? Are these options mutually exclusive? Do you think that one day they will receive God’s mercy and begin to believe the gospel? Why or why not? Do you believe that God can use your own past mistakes to help save you?

36. Romans 11:1–24

Now I ask, did God reject his people? Certainly not, for I am also an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham of the tribe of Benjamin. “God did not reject his people” [Psal. 94:14] whom he chose long ago. Or do you not know what scripture says in the passage about Elijah, when he appeals to God against Israel? “Lord, they murdered your prophets, demolished your altars; only I am left, and they seek to slay me” [1 Kings 19:10, 14]. But what is God’s response to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not knelt before Baal” [cf. 1 Kings 19:18]. Similarly, at the present time also, there is a remnant by God’s gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it no longer depends on good deeds, since if it did, it would not be by grace. (11:1–6)

What is the point? Israel did not obtain what it was searching for. The ones God chose obtained it, but the rest were blinded. Just as it is written, “God put them into a stupor. Their eyes could not see, and their ears could not hear until the present day” [cf.