

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 6

Monday, April 6th

Romans 3

1 What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? 2 Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

3 What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? 4 Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:

"So that you may be proved right when you speak
and prevail when you judge."

5 But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) 6 Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? 7 Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" 8 Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is just!

9 What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. 10 As it is written:

"There is no one righteous, not even one;

11 there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.

12 All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one."

13 "Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit."
"The poison of vipers is on their lips."

14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

16 ruin and misery mark their ways,

17 and the way of peace they do not know."

18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who

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believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 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 justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

27 Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the "law" that requires faith. 28 For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from observing the law. 29 Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, 30 since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. 31 Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

Points of interest:

- For the next five days, we'll be reading from the New Testament letters of Paul, our friend from the Acts passages. As we saw in those Acts passages, Paul did quite a bit of traveling around the Mediterranean world. He would come to a town, share the story of Jesus, start a church among those who were interested, and then move on to the next town rather quickly. Often, he would use letters to answer questions that came up after he left. This letter to the Romans is instead a letter of introduction; Paul is planning on visiting Rome, and he sends this letter ahead to explain who he is and what he believes.
- 'What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?'—this is a question the early church was immensely interested in. Now that they've discovered that salvation and the Holy Spirit are available to the Gentiles, it has opened up a pretty big question: What was that 2000-year-old covenant with the Israelites all about then? Was everything the Israelites went through meaningless? Has God changed his mind? Has he abandoned the Israelites? Not only Jews would be interested in the answers to these questions; they had implications for God's trustworthiness in general. If God backed out of his agreement with the Jews, how can we trust him to fulfill his current promises to the Gentiles?
- 'Much in every way!'—the Jews have not been cheated, by any means. From the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus, God gave more attention to the Jews, speaking to them and showing them his ways. They had much more information about who God is, and many more examples of how to relate to God.
- 'Let us do evil that good may result'—people are exaggerating Paul's message about God's grace to discredit it or mock it. If our mistakes and failures are chances for God to show his mercy and power, shouldn't we fail as often as possible? That way God can show just how powerful and forgiving God is. I think their point is that if you depend on grace and faith instead of on the rules, you encourage bad behavior. While Paul later goes on to answer this concern further, he starts by saying that the line of thinking is an absurd distortion of what grace is all about. Sin and death aren't enjoyable; they're things people want and need to be rescued from. So, if you want to use grace as an excuse to sin more, go right ahead, Paul is saying: you'll just be making yourself miserable.

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- 'Do we have any advantage? Not at all!'—this seems an awful lot like a contradiction. Having just said that the Jews have many advantages of every kind, he now says that they have none of any kind. What on earth does Paul mean? I think what he's saying is that the Jews possess the advantage of knowing more about God and having more access to God—both good things—but that it doesn't necessarily make them better, happier, more faithful people. In fact, much of the history of the Jews tells the story of their consistent rejection of God. It's not God, but the Jews, who were unfaithful to their covenant.
- 'As it is written'—what follows is a medley of quotes from the Psalms, with a little Isaiah thrown in. The message is clear: people are predisposed to mistreat God, others, and even themselves.
- 'whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law'—it might have been tempting for the Jews to assume that the medley above referred to those bad people on the outside. Paul says, 'Of course not. You can only break a law if you're in its jurisdiction.' The law he's referring to here is the terms of the covenant between God and Israel. So, these terrible lawbreakers can't be the Gentiles—it's not their law, after all—but must actually be the Jews.
- 'all are justified freely'—to be justified means to be made right, to be set straight. God is willing and able to straighten out anything crooked in our lives.
- 'Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded'—the Jews might be tempted to think highly of themselves because of their special relationship with God. The fact that they've disregarded much of what God has told them undercuts their ability to boast in that way. Everyone is equal before God.
- 'there is only one God'—Paul is citing the most important, most famous commandment in the law: 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength' (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). I think he's doing a little teasing of these fans of the law: 'Have you read the law about there being only one God?' God is the same God, for Jews and for Gentiles. That's what the law says.
- 'Rather, we uphold the law'—the same commandment from the note above goes on to say, 'These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts' (Deuteronomy 6:6). Jesus' death and resurrection, and the subsequent pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Jews and Gentiles alike, fulfills this very law.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Think for a moment about who you would like to be—the ideal you, the person that you want to be in your own eyes, the eyes of others, and maybe even the eyes of God. Now think for a moment about the person you actually are. Are there some things you really dislike about yourself, things you get frustrated by, a consistent area that you continually feel doesn't go well for you? What would it mean for you to know that Jesus fully accepts you in spite of all the things that you wish were different? How would it change how you relate to God? How you think about yourself? Ask God to help you know what it feels like to be 'justified freely.'
- *For your six:* Pray that your six would be open to receiving God's grace, and that it would positively affect how they live life, offering them a deep sense of freedom and joy.

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- *For America:* Whether at a national, state or local level, America is a country comprised of all sorts of different groups of people, and each of these groups can spend a fair amount of time trying to prove how they are better than the rest. Pray for a stop to this rivalry and boasting. Pray that all of the different camps would have radical humility, letting go of their sense of superiority and learning to peacefully interact with one another.

Tuesday, April 7th

Romans 11: 1-27

1 I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. 2 God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: 3 "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? 4 And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." 5 So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. 6 And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

7 What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened, 8 as it is written:

"God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that could not see
and ears that could not hear,
to this very day."

9 And David says:

"May their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them.

10 May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,
and their backs be bent forever."

11 Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. 12 But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!

13 I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry 14 in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. 15 For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? 16 If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

17 If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, 18 do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." 20 Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you

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stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

22 Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. 23 And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

25 I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not think you are superior: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, 26 and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written:

"The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.

27 And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins."

Points of interest:

- 'Did God reject his people? By no means!'—again we come back to the same question as in our previous passage: does God's acceptance of the Gentiles mean he is reneging on his promises to Israel? Far from it. In fact, it was always part of God's promise to Israel that the Gentiles would be blessed as well. As God told Abraham, 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Genesis 12:3, March 4th). Paul himself, a descendant of Abraham, is fulfilling God's promise right now.
- 'they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars'—Elijah was a prophet during a particularly bleak time in Israelite history, and he was ready to give up on the Israelites. But God was not.
- 'Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?'—as we saw in the Acts 13 passage (April 4th), the fact that the Gentiles have so enthusiastically received the good news about Jesus has been something of a problem for Paul's Jewish listeners. They are tripping over this idea that Jesus is for everyone and everyone needs Jesus. Paul's Jewish listeners want to believe that they are somehow different: that Jesus belongs to them in a special way, or that they don't need quite so much help from Jesus as the Gentiles do. This insistence on their specialness has kept them from coming to Jesus. But Paul doesn't expect this situation to last forever. It's exactly the situation Isaiah 2 (March 15th) described: many nations are streaming toward the God of Israel, but Israel itself is lagging behind. But Isaiah 11 (March 16th) promises that Israel will indeed eventually be gathered—along with the other nations—to God:

He will raise a banner for the nations
and gather the exiles of Israel;
he will assemble the scattered people of Judah
from the four quarters of the earth.

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- 'how much greater riches will their fullness bring'—this reminds me of another verse from Isaiah 11: 'The wolf will live with the lamb.' There are no winners and losers, in the end, with God. Everyone will enjoy God's benefits together.
- 'you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others'—the 'you' here would be the Gentiles. Even beyond being blessed through Abraham, they have been adopted into Abraham's family.
- 'do not consider yourself to be superior'—these Gentile believers are susceptible to the same temptation that has just tripped up Paul's Jewish listeners, the temptation to think of themselves as better. We human beings have a limitless ability to take God's kindness toward us and turn it into some badge of pride. The Jews did so with God's call to Abraham. The Gentile believers are prone to do it with Jesus' message of forgiveness and rescue. Sadly, over history, Gentile followers of Jesus have not heeded Paul's warnings. We have, in fact, specifically, with frequent deeply tragic consequences, thought of ourselves as superior to the Jews. And furthermore, Christians have in general tended to consider themselves superior to other people. Paul tells us that this perversion of God's grace only leads to us being cut off from that very grace: 'Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.'

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Consider that, like Paul's Jewish listeners, we all have a profound propensity towards criticism of others and wanting to feel superior. Pick a person, group or situation which you find yourself leaning towards criticizing or looking down upon. What is it about them that you just don't like? Does something about them highlight something about you? Do you feel threatened? Talk to God about this. Ask him for his view on that person, group or situation. Ask God for his security as opposed to our own sense of security that comes from feeling superior to others.
- *For your six:* Pray that your six would be surprised by the goodness and riches of God. Pray that the surprising and abundant riches that the Gentiles experienced through Jesus, would also be there for your six.
- *For America:* Jews could not fathom how God could do good things for the Gentiles. We get the picture of God having good things to offer to just about everyone; at any point, he is willing to graft people back into his blessings, whatever the circumstances may be. Pick a sector of society or aspect of life in America—whether that be the criminal justice system, financial lending companies or our methods of waste disposal—in which it is hard to fathom God being able to do anything really good. Pray that God's direction, favor and power would be at work in that very place.

Wednesday, April 8th

Romans 15:5-13

5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, 6 so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. 8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed 9 and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing the praises of your name."

10 Again, it says,

"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."

11 And again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him."

12 And again, Isaiah says,

"The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope."

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Points of interest:

- 'Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you'—Paul is basically begging people, 'Please, get along, won't you.' It's the unity of Jews and Gentiles (and everyone else) that pleases God; and it's imperative in Paul's opinion that all of these followers of Jesus accept one another. He uses Christ's unconditional acceptance of people regardless of status, gender, ethnicity, put-togetherness, etc. as the reason that they too should accept one another. Just as Jesus accepted them in a state of imperfection, Paul urges his audience to do the same for one another.
- 'so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed'—Jesus is the fulfillment of what God had been promising to the Jews' ancestors all along. God promised that all the nations of the world would be blessed, and now through Jesus they are seeing that promise come to fruition. That's why it's so imperative that they accept one another. This is an exciting moment, which should be celebrated: God has finally brought about the means for everyone, everywhere to experience his goodness to a whole new level. Somehow, though, Paul's listeners are taking it as an occasion to argue about whom exactly is more blessed.
- 'As it is written'—in case his readership questions what these promises to the Patriarchs were, Paul pulls out a handful of examples directly from their scriptures to remind them (Psalm 18:49, Deut. 32:43, Psalm 117:1 Isaiah 11:10). He wants to make it clear that God always intended for the Gentiles to have a place in his kingdom. God has not changed his plan.
- 'so that you may overflow with hope'—this is Paul's prayer for them. They've had a very tense discussion about what it means to worship the one true God. So, he ends by reminding them that both he and God have high hopes for them and good intentions toward them. He lets his

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readers know that what he really wants is God to fill them with a positive outlook of what is to come, which just bubbles over and oozes out of them.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* We, like Paul's Jewish listeners, can sometimes need a reminder of where we have come from and who we are. Take some time to reflect on your own journey with God, remembering significant milestones along the way. Think back to when you first started a relationship with God. What initially drew you to God? What significant events have happened along the way? How have you grown? What have you learned? Are there things you used to experience earlier on in your faith life that you've lost touch with along the way? Ask Jesus to renew your faith and to remind you of the things that have drawn you to God along the way.
- *For your six:* Pray that your six would experience profound acceptance. Pray that God would heal your six of any ways that they have experienced rejection or feared being rejected. Are there any ways that you might be able to show them acceptance? Could you be a safe, trustworthy and loyal friend to your six through the ups and downs of life?
- *For America:* It's probably safe to say that 'overflowing with hope' is not the general attitude of our nation right now. The #1 song on the radio for 2008 was 'Bleeding in Love,' by Leona Lewis, to be followed shortly thereafter by Rhianna's hit single, 'Disturbia.' If these song titles are any indication, it seems we could most definitely use some increase of hope in our nation. Pray that America -and the songs played on our radios and ipods -would be oozing with a joyful perspective that inspires people to believe in and work for good things.

Thursday, April 9th

Galatians 2

1 Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. 2 I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. 3 Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. 4 This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. 5 We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

6 As for those who were held in high esteem—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favoritism—they added nothing to my message. 7 On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. 8 For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. 9 James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. 10 All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.

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11 When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. 13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

14 When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

15 "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles 16 know that a person is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

17 "But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18 If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.

19 "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

Points of interest:

- This letter is from Paul to a group of Gentile believers in the province of Galatia, in modern-day Turkey. Sometime after Paul left them, he was followed by a group of Jewish believers from Jerusalem who were saying, 'Didn't Paul mention that you needed to be circumcised in order to fully enjoy the benefits of following Jesus? Good thing we came along to tell you what Paul forgot.' Occasions like this eventually led to the council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 (April 5th). In the meantime, Paul is responding by letter to the misinformation of these Jewish messengers. Apparently, the Galatians have been strangely receptive to their message. Paul sees this as dangerous. The Galatians are in danger of giving up a dynamic relationship with a living God, for the sake of picking up instead some external symbols of specialness.
- 'after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem'—when this chapter begins, Paul is in the middle of giving a brief personal history. He is explaining where he got his message and the authority to preach it. This visit to Jerusalem is probably the one mentioned in Acts 11: 27-30; Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to bring some famine relief money from Antioch to Jerusalem. Paul's point is that, since he became a follower of Jesus, he has been in Jerusalem only rarely and briefly. He is not in any way dependent on Jerusalem for his authority.
- 'some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy'—this is a bit dramatic, but I think Paul's point is that Jewish believers came to the churches he was starting among the Gentiles, pretending to be partners, but actually building a case against him for teaching what they considered to be an unbiblical gospel.

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- 'Cephas'—Cephas is yet another name for Peter. 'Simon' is Peter's given name. 'Peter' is a nickname Jesus gave him—it means, 'Rock,' in Greek. 'Cephas' is the same nickname, in Aramaic.
- 'those who were held in high esteem'—Paul is keeping a careful balance here. On the one hand, he acknowledges that James and Cephas are recognized leaders of the church. On the other hand, he wants to be clear that his authority is independent of them; Paul received his commission to tell the Gentiles about Jesus directly from God.
- 'they added nothing to my message'—as in the Council of Jerusalem, all of these leaders are in complete agreement about Paul's message. None of them thinks that he should be telling Gentiles that they must be circumcised.
- 'They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews'—the Gentiles and the Jews have much different cultures. Paul has been called by God to speak to the Gentiles. The others are more comfortable in—and probably much more effective within—their own Jewish culture. So, they decide to divide up the labor. It's not entirely an even split: James, Peter, and John and many others are all concentrating on one people group; Barnabas and Paul are given responsibility for the rest of the world.
- 'he used to eat with the Gentiles'—apparently, Peter is taking literally the vision he received on Simon's rooftop (Acts 10, April 2nd). Paul seems to be saying that Peter is not only eating with Gentiles, but he is eating what Gentiles eat.
- 'he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles'—Antioch seems to be a relatively tolerant place. After all, it's in Antioch that the Jewish believers first started inviting Gentiles to join them. Peter fits in with that more inclusive atmosphere until the more conservative Jews from Jerusalem arrive.
- 'How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?'—to paraphrase Moe the Bartender, 'You're kind of all over the map there, Peter.' Peter is supposed to be concentrating on talking about Jesus with Jews, but he's hanging out with the Gentile believers in Antioch. One day, he's not even eating kosher himself; the next, he's telling Gentiles that they need to be kosher. It's easy for me to be more sympathetic with Peter than Paul is. They are, after all, trying to figure out an entire new theology on the fly. Also, Peter is, in the end, supposed to be working among the Jews; so, it's not so surprising that when more conservative Jews are around he would be careful not to offend them. But Paul sees a great danger in Peter's inconsistency, particularly for the vulnerable, new Gentile believers. He's giving a confusing mixed message: is the good news really about grace through faith in Jesus, or is it about these cultural behaviors?
- 'and not sinful Gentiles'—I believe Paul is being ironic here. These Jews are tempted to think of themselves as knowing better, but they're making the same mistake that they would ascribe to foolish Gentile ignorance.
- 'if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!'—you can't depend on both Jesus' grace and cultural badges to save you. You have to choose one or the other.

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Taking it home:

- *For you:* Take a moment to thank God for any people who feel like they have been ‘partners in God’—people who are journeying alongside of you as you pursue God. God doesn’t want you to go at it alone. Ask God to give you more and deeper partnership in whatever he is calling you towards. Also, pay attention today for any opportunities you have to come alongside of, partner with, and cheer someone else on in their walk with God.
- *For your six:* Pray that your six would have a deep sense of personal conviction. Pray that they wouldn’t be like Peter who fell prey to people pleasing, caring what others would think and following the ‘popular opinion’. Pray that your six would want to dig deep and explore truth for themselves and that God would guard them from others who might detract from their pursuit.
- *For America:* Customs. Cultures. People. They are all in abundance here. Pray that in their abundance there would be a deep sense of understanding and appreciation for the different ways that people live. Pray today for understanding and reconciliation across the lines of race. Pray that God would give people wisdom and compassion and enable people to actually get along well with those who are different from themselves.

Friday, April 10th

Ephesians 3

1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. 13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

14 For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the

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Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Points of interest:

- ‘the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles’—the ‘you Gentiles’ specifically refers to the Gentile followers of Jesus in the large city of Ephesus (where Paul had spent a fair amount of time helping people to grow in their faith). He writes to them as a literal prisoner, but he views his sentence as just a part of following Jesus and doesn’t seem too phased by his incarceration. He is thrown into prison after upsetting some powerful Jewish religious leaders by spending time with a Gentile friend in Jerusalem, then going to the temple. Paul is pretty much willing to do anything, including facing prison and death, to stick up for the Gentile’s right to worship.
- ‘mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel’—through Jesus, Gentiles actually get to join in on the promises and blessings that God gave to Israel. And they don’t just get to join in from a distance or have to go through painful rituals, such as circumcision (like the Jews thought). Instead because of Jesus they actually are adopted and made part of the family. Not only is this a mystery to most people at the time, but it actually sounds like heresy. You can imagine the Jews’ strong reaction to this news—where they once believed that they were the sole beneficiaries to a grand estate that God was going to give them, now a whole bunch of outsiders were being written equally into the family will. By the way, Paul’s belief in this mystery is what leads him to get thrown in prison.
- ‘to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery’—the mystery—that *everyone* through faith could experience God —was not clear to people. Jews and Gentiles alike had had some pretty set understandings about what it meant to believe in God, and now Jesus had somehow turned everything around. It leaves people living under a fog that obstructs their understanding about how they themselves and other people relate to God. Paul wants to clear up this haziness by explaining to people how this faith-in-Jesus-thing gets played out and what it means in their current situation.
- ‘which for ages past was kept hidden in God’—as we have seen, all throughout the history of God’s people there are references to God’s desire to bless all people. However up until Jesus, it wasn’t clear to people how this would in fact happen. And as we have seen, most Jews conjectured that the promised Messiah would rescue them from Roman oppression and restore the temple to what it was like during Solomon’s days. They were wrong and had a hard time coming to grips with what God actually intended.
- ‘to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms’—in addition to rulers and people who hold positions of power in our earthly world, Paul alludes to a spiritual world that exists simultaneously. This spiritual world also has a variety of rulers and authorities made up of both angels and demons. Gentiles in Paul’s day were particularly afraid of these unseen powers and

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created all sorts of idols and gods to protect themselves. Paul points out that even these powers are subject to Jesus, reassuring the Gentiles they have nothing to fear and can remain committed to Jesus' protection.

- 'we may approach God with freedom and confidence'—previously, approaching God had been just the opposite. There was a lot of preparation and ritual, a good amount of fear, and it was rather selective. People could only come before God by offering sacrifices through a priest and being ceremonial clean. Priests existed from the time of Moses and served as intermediaries for the people of Israel. And even then the priests could only encounter the presence of God in the holiest part of the temple one time a year. Jesus' death on the cross served as the ultimate sacrifice and freed people from relying any longer on offering sacrifices of their own. Now instead of a priest, Jesus was the intermediary and allowed people direct access to God all the time. So God is no longer far off, nor do people have to fear that they are unclean or their sacrifices are insufficient. It's like Jesus gives everyone VIP passes backstage to schmooze and meet the band—but here the band is the eternal, powerful, living, saving God.
- 'from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name'—Paul claims that God is the Father of all people everywhere—not just the Israelites. Fathers in that day and age were supreme authority figures; children received their names, identities, purposes and legacies from their fathers. And God is the father of all people. He names each group, sees his likeness in them, and blesses them with purpose and an inheritance.
- To grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ'—Paul paints a picture of the four dimensions of Jesus' love. Yes, that's right, four dimensions. God's love is big—very BIG! Too big to actually have words for. The mystery to which Paul refers is fueled by this love, and it's Paul's desire that the Ephesians would be able to better understand the immensity of it.
- 'that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God'—the whole purpose of following Jesus alongside others and grasping the vastness of his love is to receive some type of abundant outpouring of God. I think this 'fullness,' though, could be two-fold. There's the fullness of God's presence in the form of the Holy Spirit, as God pours out it on each of us just like Jesus promised in Acts 1 (March 31st). There's also the full richness of many different people, from many different cultures, becoming one body and, joining together to worship God. Since every people group in some way bears the image of God, the more people come to him from all different backgrounds, the fuller picture of God it creates.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Paul keeps alluding to 'Christ' again and again in this passage (9x to be exact), as if he just can't fully communicate all that he wants to about Jesus. There's just too much. He is bigger and deeper and more generous than even one of his most famous followers can depict. Today is Good Friday, the day we commemorate Jesus' crucifixion on the cross. Take some time to be still and just think about Jesus. What do you personally think about Jesus? If you are a follower of Jesus, what has following him meant for you? If not, what interests you about Jesus? What's a little too large or strange for you to comprehend? Pick a few times throughout your day today where you can pause for a minute or two to reflect on Jesus. In

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those moments, ask Jesus to show you, and to give you the ability to grasp, a new layer of the love he has for you.

- *For your six:* What do your six think about Jesus? Pray today that God would give your six openness to believing in and relating to Jesus. Pray that God would powerfully and clearly demonstrate the expanse of Jesus' love in their lives.
- *For America:* Ask God today for 'more' for our country. Ask that in whatever ways he has already shown up and done great things, that he would increase that. Tell God you want to see immeasurably more of him in America.

Saturday, April 11th

Revelation 7:1-12

1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: 3 "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." 4 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

5 From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,

6 from the tribe of Asher 12,000,
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,

7 from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,

8 from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."

11 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying:

"Amen!"

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Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!"

Points of interest:

- The last two passages in our guide are from the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. Revelation is a letter written from the apostle John to seven churches, once again in modern-day Turkey. These churches are facing a wave of fierce, officially-sponsored persecution, and John is encouraging them to endure these troubles by sharing with them a vision he saw of God's ultimate purposes in the world. He writes in a genre called apocalypse; it's unfamiliar to us, but was quite popular in John's day. Apocalypse prominently features angelic appearances, fantastical creatures, the symbolic use of numbers, ornate visual images, and repetition of images and numbers.
- 'standing at the four corners of the earth'—these four angels seem to have the ability to bring peace or bring destruction to the entire earth.
- 'holding back the four winds of the earth'—it's like the world is taking a deep breath before what comes next.
- 'until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God'—something terrible is indeed about to happen, but whoever has this seal will apparently be protected from harm.
- '144,000 from all the tribes of Israel'—all of the numbers in Revelation probably worked according to a code that was well known to its original readers. We've lost the code, but there are still a few things we can figure out about the meaning of this number: it's multiples of twelve to reflect the twelve tribes, it's a large number but countable, and it's evenly distributed. So, we have an orderly, large but countable group of Israelites who are being rescued from the upcoming trouble.
- 'from the tribe of Manasseh'—this is a slightly non-standard listing of the twelve tribes. Manasseh, who is actually a grandson of Israel, is listed; and to make room for him Dan, one of Israel's sons, is omitted. I think the idea is that the composition of 'Israel' might change slightly, but in the end the complete number is gathered. The enumeration of the twelve tribes, by the way, is only symbolic; by the time of John, almost no Jew knew their exact tribal descent (*IVP Bible Background Commentary*).
- 'a great multitude that no one could count'—the scene shifts from this large, but ordered and counted, group of Israelites to an uncountable mass from every nation, people group, and language. I personally believe that these are not two separate crowds, but instead two different representations of the same crowd. This group of people being saved by God is a carefully counted group of God's chosen ones (the 144,000 Israelites) and at the same time a countless group from every nation (the great multitude). Regardless of whether it's one group or two, it's clear that both Jews and Gentiles are being rescued here, and responding in praise. This is a fulfillment of David's prophecy from Psalm 86 (March 11th):

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All the nations you have made
will come and worship before you, Lord;
they will bring glory to your name.

- ‘wearing white robes and were holding palm branches’—I think this uniform signifies that they are worshippers or pilgrims.
- ‘the elders and the four living creatures’—from an earlier part of John’s vision, these elders and living creatures seem to be ancient and powerful angelic beings whom we might call the worship leaders in God’s heavenly throne room.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Pray today for your family. God doesn’t overlook the families (tribes) to which people belong. Pray for God’s blessing and protection on each member of your immediate family and pray that God would remember your ENTIRE extended family as well. Ask God to be at work in your family—improving your relationships, healing past wounds and misunderstandings and creating an atmosphere of safety and encouragement.
- *For your six:* John is given this elaborate vision, that gives him hope and a promising picture of what is to come. Do any of your six need a vision of where their life is headed? Pray for your six who feel stuck in their job, tired of life or just unmotivated. Ask that God would give vision to your six and give them a picture of hope of what is to come.
- *For America:* This passage exemplifies the reality that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. There is something awe-inspiring and captivating about this united, massive, and diverse group of people all joining together to worship Jesus. It seems that Jesus is actively seeking people—lots of people and from lots of different places. Pray that God would give us a heart for the people from every nation, tribe, people and language where there are very few followers of Jesus. Pray that God would raise up people to go to these groups and partner with God in his work of rescuing them from trouble.

Sunday, April 12th

Revelation 21:9-22:5

9 One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. 13 There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. 14 The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

15 The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. 16 The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. 17 He

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measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by human measurement, which the angel was using. 18 The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. 19 The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. 21 The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.

22 I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. 25 On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. 26 The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. 27 Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Points of interest:

- 'the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues'—just to remind you, I did say that repeated, symbolic numbers is a key feature of Revelation. Once again, we don't really know why it's the number seven here, but there was probably a widely known code. What we can get from this is that things are coming very close to an end.
- 'I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb'—the Lamb is Jesus. We'd been promised a 'feast of rich food for all the nations' (Isaiah 25, March 17th). It turns out that the Bible ends with a wedding feast.
- 'the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God'—interestingly, the bride isn't a person, but an entire city: a new, heavenly Jerusalem. Jerusalem has been an interesting source of tension throughout our study. At times, for those of us who aren't Jews, God's purposes for the nations have seemed oddly or uncomfortably Jerusalem-centric. For instance, Isaiah 2 (March 15th) said,

In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

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Then—unsettlingly, given how prominently it had been featured up until then—Jesus dismissively speaks of throwing Jerusalem into the ocean, because in light of what he’s doing the temple is strictly speaking, unnecessary. How exactly does Jerusalem fit into God’s ultimate plans? And how can both Jesus and Isaiah be right? Well, now we get our answer. God has been preparing a new, improved, and expanded Jerusalem. It turns out that the Israelites’ Jerusalem was like a toy version or an architects’ model for this new Jerusalem—a Jerusalem for everyone.

- ‘like a jasper, clear as crystal’—words fail to describe the wonder of this city. It’s beautiful, well-proportioned, and opulent.
- ‘by human measurement, which the angel was using’—I had no idea that the angels have their own standard of measurement, and I’m amused that John makes sure to tell us that he’s giving us human cubits, not angelic ones.
- ‘I did not see a temple in the city’—in the old Jerusalem, there was a temple to represent God’s presence. In the new one, God represents himself.
- ‘The nations will walk by its light’—this is a fulfillment of Isaiah 49:6 (March 19th). In the light of God’s presence, the nations can finally see clearly.
- ‘On no day will its gates ever be shut’—it’s so safe that you never need to lock the doors.
- ‘The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it’—this new Jerusalem reflects some features of the old one’s association with Israel—gates named after each tribe, for example. But it also contains contributions from all other nations of the world.
- ‘the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations’—I think this is John’s version of Isaiah’s picture of the peaceful and prosperous end God has in mind for the nations:

On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;

8 he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people’s disgrace
from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken.

9 In that day they will say,
“Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation (Isaiah 25, March 17th)

Taking it home:

- *For you:* In this vision of the world to come, the Lamb—Jesus—serves as a lamp that lights up the entire city. How has Jesus been a light to you during these past 40 days? Reflect on the ways that Jesus has personally been good to you and what he has shown you.

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- *For your six:* In this passage, we get the picture of God planning all along a grand, perfect and complete city that eventually does in fact come to be. Pray that God's purposes for your six would come to pass in the same way.
- *For America:* The Holy City pictured here seems almost too good to be true—a picture of perfect beauty and all things being made right. Pray for God to work in America in ways that seem too good to be true. Pray that America would take its right place among the nations that are lighted by and bring their best to this heavenly city.