

ROMANS
for
EVERYONE

PART 1

CHAPTERS 1-8

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

Luke for Everyone

John for Everyone, Part 1

John for Everyone, Part 2

Acts for Everyone, Part 1

Acts for Everyone, Part 2

Romans for Everyone, Part 1

Romans for Everyone, Part 2

1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Hattie*

*'In all these things we are completely victorious
through the one who loved us'*

Romans 8.37

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

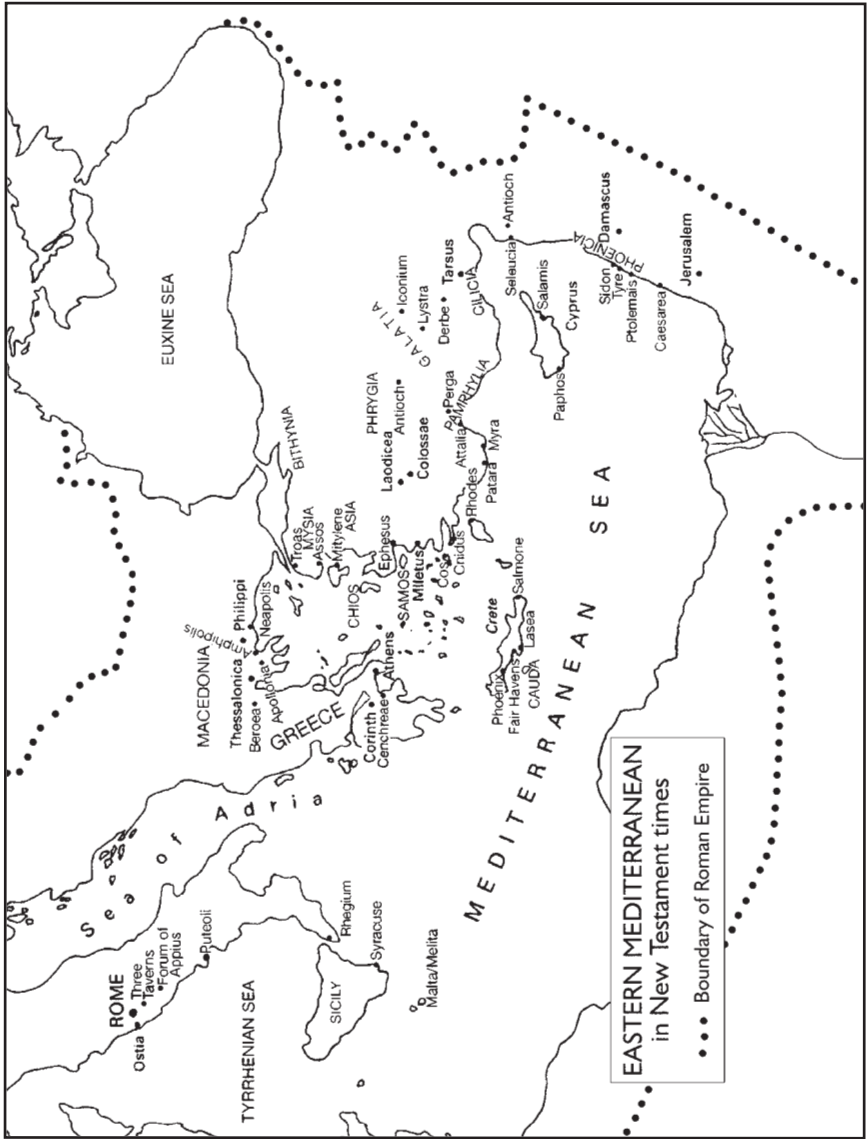
INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have tried, naturally, to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome is his masterpiece. It covers many different topics from many different angles, bringing them all together into a fast-moving and compelling line of thought. Reading it sometimes feels like being swept along in a small boat on a swirling, bubbling river. We need to hold on tight if we're going to stay on board. But if we do, the energy and excitement of it all is unbeatable. The reason is obvious: because Romans is all about the God who, as Paul says, unveils his power and grace through the good news about Jesus. And, as Paul insists again and again, this power and grace is available for everyone who believes. So here it is: Romans for everyone!

Tom Wright



ROMANS 1.1–7

Good News about the New King

¹Paul, a slave of the Messiah, called to be an apostle, set apart for God's good news, ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the sacred writings – ³the good news about his son, who was descended from David's seed in terms of flesh, ⁴and who was marked out powerfully as God's son in terms of the spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead: Jesus, the royal Messiah, our Lord!

⁵Through him we have received grace and apostleship to bring about believing obedience among all the nations for the sake of his name. ⁶That includes you, too, who are called by Jesus the Messiah.

⁷This letter comes to all in Rome who love God, all who are called to be his holy people. Grace and peace to you from God our father, and Messiah Jesus, the Lord.

From time to time, scientists have sent space probes to Mars. The object of the exercise is of course to try to find out more about the great planet which, although it's our nearest neighbour, is still over a hundred million miles away. For centuries people have imagined that there might be life on Mars, perhaps intelligent life. There are undoubtedly many new things to be learned, to be discovered. If only we could get there safely and work out what was going on.

A lot of people feel like that about St Paul in general, and Romans in particular. Most people who have at least a nodding acquaintance with the Christian faith are aware that Paul was a striking and important figure in its early days. Many know that Romans is his greatest letter. Some may even have heard of the powerful effect this letter has had, over and over again, in the history of the church: great figures like Augustine, Luther and Karl Barth have studied it and come back with a fresh and challenging word from God. But to many Christians in the Western world Romans remains as much of a mystery as Mars. 'I tried to read it once,' they say, like a scientist describing yet another failed space probe, 'but I got bogged down and I couldn't work it out.'

A different kind of problem lies in wait for those who have learned the Christian faith in one of the great churches in the Western world. Many traditional Roman Catholics, and others in similar traditions, know that the Protestants have made Paul a great hero, and they are therefore suspicious of him. But there are problems for Protestants, too. Ever since the Reformation in the sixteenth century, many churches have taken Paul as their main guide, and have seen Romans as the book above all in which he sets out the basic doctrines they hold. Since part of my own background is firmly in this tradition – which is

why I began studying this letter intensively for myself, 30 years ago – I understand the power and importance of this tradition. But I have to report that it has only colonized certain parts of the great planet called Romans. It has mapped and discussed many craters, has analysed many substances found in them, and has laid down well-trodden roads across some of the planet's surface. But there are other parts which have remained a mystery – not least the parts about the coming together of Jews and **Gentiles**, which Paul comes back to again and again throughout the letter. It is time for a fresh probe, for some new mapping, for paths to be hacked through unexplored territory. We still need the old maps and roads, of course. We won't lose anything that they gave us. In fact, we shall find that we get more out of them by seeing and using them within the bigger picture, Paul's own larger picture, of God, Jesus, the world and ourselves.

To understand the first seven verses of the letter, let's stay with the image of space travel, but see Romans not now as a planet but as a rocket. It is designed to take us a very long way, and is kitted out with all kinds of things we shall need as we travel and when we arrive at our far-off destination. A rocket like that needs one thing in particular before it can even start: a first-rate, solid, carefully planned launching pad. You can't just set the rocket up in an open field and hope it will lift off successfully. This opening passage of the letter is the carefully, deliberately constructed launching pad for this particular letter. It is worth looking at each part of it quite closely.

Like most people writing letters in the classical world, Paul begins by saying who he is, and who the letter is intended for. But, as in some of his other letters, he expands this formula almost beyond breaking point by adding more and more information on both sides. His opening greeting could be summarized from verses 1 and 7: Paul, a slave of the **Messiah**, to all in Rome who love God; grace to you and peace. Why has he expanded this simple greeting into the passage we now have?

He wants to concentrate particularly on the **good news**, or, as many translations put it, 'the **gospel**'. The word 'gospel' doesn't occur very often in the letter, but it lies underneath everything Paul says. Here he lays out what this 'gospel' actually is, partly because this defines who Paul himself is (he has been 'set apart' for the particular job of announcing this gospel) and partly because the gospel itself creates a map on which you can see the whole world, and find where you belong in it. That's what verses 5 and 6 are doing: the gospel claims the whole world for King Jesus, and that includes the Christians in Rome.

But isn't it rather odd to put it like that? Isn't it actually rather daring, perhaps even somewhat risky? Fancy writing like this to Rome of all places, the greatest city of the world at the time, the home of

the most powerful man in the world, the Caesar, whose official titles included ‘son of god’, whose birthday was hailed as ‘good news’, and who claimed the allegiance, the loyalty, of the greatest empire the world had ever seen! But Paul knows exactly what he is doing. Jesus is the *true* king, the world’s rightful Lord, and it is vital that the Christians in Rome itself know this and live by it.

In fact, what Paul says about Jesus in this passage, especially verses 3 and 4, seems almost designed to stake a claim which puts that of Caesar in the shade. Jesus is the true ‘**son of God**’. He comes from a royal house far older than anything Rome can claim: that of **David**, a thousand years before. His **resurrection**, which Paul sees not as a strange freak or bizarre **miracle** but as the beginning of ‘the resurrection of the dead’ for which most Jews had been longing, is the sign of a power which trumps that of tyrants and bullies the world over. Death is their final weapon, and he has broken it.

But Paul isn’t just writing this with an eye on Caesar. He is drawing on the deep riches of Israel’s prophecies and psalms, as he implies in verse 2. There were many different ideas around within first-century Judaism about a king who might come to rule over Israel and rescue the nation from foreign oppression (which in Paul’s day meant, ultimately, Rome). Paul, guided by what he knows of Jesus, and especially his cross and resurrection, pulls out one strand in particular, that of the coming king who would be God’s son (2 Samuel 7.14; Psalm 2.7 and elsewhere). This is the ‘good news’: it has happened! God has done it! The king has come!

So how is the king claiming the world as his own? By sending ambassadors out into that world with the good news. These ‘ambassadors’ are called ‘**apostles**’, which simply means ‘sent-out people’. That is the point Paul is making when he refers to his own work in verses 1 and 5.

The ‘good news’ is not, first and foremost, about something that can happen to us. What happens to us through the ‘gospel’ is indeed dramatic and exciting: God’s good news will catch us up and transform our lives and our hopes like nothing else. But the ‘good news’ which Paul announces is primarily good news about something that has happened, events through which the world is now a different place. It is about what God has done in Jesus, the Messiah, Israel’s true king, the world’s true Lord.

This means that verses 6 and 7, though originally addressed to people in one ancient city, open up to include us as well. We, too, are called to ‘believing obedience’ (verse 5). The gospel isn’t like an advertisement for a product we might or might not want to buy, depending on how we felt at the time. It is more like a command from an authority we would be foolish to resist. Caesar’s messengers didn’t go round the world saying ‘Caesar is lord, so if you feel you need to have a

Roman-empire kind of experience, you might want to submit to him.' The challenge of Paul's gospel is that someone very different from Caesar, exercising a very different kind of power, is the world's true lord. It will take the whole letter, now well and truly launched, to discover what that means in practice.

ROMANS 1.8-13

Paul Longs to See the Roman Christians

⁸Let me say first that I thank my God for all of you, through Jesus the king, because all the world has heard the news of your faith. ⁹God is my witness – the God I worship in my spirit in the good news of his son – that I never stop remembering you ¹⁰in my prayers. I ask God again and again that somehow at last I may now be able, in his good purposes, to come to you. ¹¹I'm longing to see you! I want to share with you some spiritual blessing to give you strength; ¹²that is, I want to encourage you, and be encouraged by you, in the faith you and I share. ¹³I don't want you to be unaware, my dear family, that I've often made plans to come to you; it's just that up to now something has always got in the way. I want to bear some fruit among you, as I have been doing among the other nations.

The first time I went to Rome there was a great deal to see. I knew about many of the classical sites, the spectacular buildings, the ancient palaces, the Forum, and so on. But there were many surprises as well. One in particular which I still find extraordinary is that the middle of the city is liable to serious flooding. The River Tiber runs through it, twisting and turning, and several parts of the town are low-lying and vulnerable. Many buildings near the river have markers which show how high the various floods – and there have been lots of them – have come. Why, I still wonder, did they build in such a dangerous place?

In ancient Rome as today, of course, the rich people lived up in the hills, the famous seven hills on which the city stands. The original imperial palace, where the Emperor Augustus lived at the time when Jesus was born, occupies most of one of them. Nero was emperor when Paul was writing this letter; his spectacular palace is on another hill, the other side of the Forum. But then as now the poorer people lived in the areas around the river; not least, in the area just across the river from the main city centre. And that is where most of the first Roman Christians lived. The chances are that the first time this great letter was read aloud it was in a crowded room in someone's house in the low-lying poorer district, just across the river from the seat of power.

Paul is longing to come and be there with them. As often, the opening of the letter, after the launching-pad itself, is a report of what Paul is praying for when he thinks of them. And the main thing he's doing is thanking God: thanking the maker of **heaven** and earth that there is a community in Rome, under Caesar's nose, who give allegiance to Jesus as Lord, who have been grasped by the vision of a different **kingdom**, a different hope, and who share a different **faith**. That's at the centre of it, as we shall see: faith, the belief and trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead (4.24, picking up 1.4). You need faith like that to be a Christian in the ancient world, as in the modern; and Paul knows that they have it in abundance.

He knows this partly because several of the Christians who are now in Rome are friends of his. Some are even his relatives, as we discover in the greetings at the end of the letter. Travel was comparatively easy in Paul's world, and people came and went on business, or for family reasons, right around the Mediterranean world. But the letter to Rome is unusual in one particular respect: Paul had not himself founded the church there. According to early memories recorded in the second century, Peter had gone to Rome after his narrow escape from Jerusalem (Acts 12), and had been the first to announce to a surprised capital, probably to the sizeable Jewish community there, that God had at last sent Israel's **Messiah**, and that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, had been raised from the dead to be Lord of the world. So Paul is in a somewhat delicate position in writing to the Roman church. He does not want to imply that they are deficient in some way. On the contrary, he thanks God for them and their faith, and looks forward to being with them so that he can be encouraged by their faith as they, he trusts, will be by his.

We shouldn't imagine, of course, that when we say 'the Roman church' there was already a large church building with hundreds of Christians coming and going around it. Forget St Peter's and the Vatican! Chapter 16 gives us a better picture: a number of houses where Christians could gather for worship, prayer, teaching and the breaking of bread. There were probably not many more than a hundred Christians in all, in a city of at least a million inhabitants. It may have been even less. There was plenty of work for an evangelist still to do. Plenty of fruit still to bear (verse 13).

Quite likely the different houses would be groupings of Christians from different backgrounds. As we shall see, Paul has to address, cautiously, some issues that may have caused tension between them. But there is one factor in particular which we need to note at this stage.

Six or eight years before Paul was writing, there had been trouble among the Jews in Rome. It is possible, even, that this had been caused by the coming of the Christian **gospel** to the Jewish groups in the city.

But Claudius, who was emperor at the time, had had enough (to say that the Romans didn't much like the Jews would be putting it mildly), and expelled the Jewish community from the city. When Paul arrived in Corinth, some of his first friends were among those who had left Rome for this reason (Acts 18.2). But with the death of Claudius in AD 54 and the accession of Nero, the Jews were allowed back.

It doesn't take much imagination to think how that might have affected the tiny Christian church. In fact, imagination can be kept on track by things that come up later in Romans itself. The pagan Romans, as I said, didn't care for the Jews. They sneered at them and distrusted them. From the Roman point of view, Christianity was bound to be seen as doubly strange and unwelcome: a kind of Jewish religion that made other Jews angry! So if, as seems likely, the church in Rome in the last years of Claudius' reign was composed entirely of non-Jews ('Gentiles' is the word we often use), it would have been easy for them to suppose that the new **message** had, as it were, left the Jewish world behind. God had done a new thing. Israel may have been the place where it all began, but now that had been left behind. All those rules and regulations, the **law** with its taboos, dietary restrictions, special holy days . . . all of it was gone. Christianity was now for the Gentile world. So they might have thought.

And then the Jews came back – including the Jewish Christians. Some of those Jewish Christians were among Paul's closest friends; they would have shared his robust view of how God had fulfilled the Jewish law through the Messiah and also transcended it by including Gentiles on equal terms in his renewed people. But other Jewish Christians will have been deeply suspicious of this: surely God gave the law to Moses? Doesn't that mean that every word of it is valid for all time? Supposing they found themselves living alongside a house-church composed mostly of Gentile Christians who celebrated their freedom from the law, how would they feel? Suspicion, fuelled by the social tensions among Rome's cosmopolitan mix of peoples, might easily turn to hostility.

Paul will address this step by step in the letter. It's important that, all the way through, we hold in our minds a historical picture of the Romans' church and its questions, rather than imagining that it was a church just like one of ours. We shall discover another key point in chapter 15: Paul is hoping that Rome will serve as the base for a new phase of mission, going around the western Mediterranean all the way to Spain. That's part of the reason for wanting the Roman church to understand the gospel he preaches as fully as possible. But at this stage the main thing he wants to do is to tell them he's praying for them. He holds them up day by day before God, thanking God that their faith is

firmly in place and praying that he may be able to come and see them and work among them before going on elsewhere. Those of us called to be pastors and teachers in the church should note this carefully. When you hope to visit a person, or a town, the best possible preparation is that you should pray in advance for a chance to see them, and for what God is going to do in their lives.

ROMANS 1.14–17

Good News, Salvation and the Justice of God

¹⁴I am under obligation to Greeks and barbarians alike, you see; both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵That's why I'm eager to announce the good news to you, too, in Rome. ¹⁶I'm not ashamed of the good news; it's God's power, bringing salvation to everyone who believes – to the Jew first, and also, equally, to the Greek. ¹⁷This is because God's covenant justice is unveiled in it, from faithfulness to faithfulness. As it says in the Bible, 'the just shall live by faith'.

When I was a boy, one of my regular holiday occupations was making plastic model aeroplanes. I remember the excitement of getting the parts out of the box, carefully cutting them off the stem which held them together, and then looking at the plan to see which ones went where. It was like one of those 'exploded' diagrams car mechanics use, with dotted lines coming out of a picture of the complete model, and with smaller pictures of the individual pieces, including the very tiny ones, at the end of each line.

It was important, too, to know the right order for assembling the whole thing. First the fuselage, then the wings, then the struts . . . and finally it all comes together. Try to stick bits together too soon and you'll end up frustrated, covered in glue, and with only half an aeroplane.

There are several passages in Paul's writings which remind me of that sort of diagram, and this is one of them. The problem, of course, is that we've got it the other way round: here is a complete aeroplane (four verses of Paul's densest writing, packed with exciting and powerful technical terms). First, we have to take it to bits, to see how each part works. Only then can we put it together again and see if it will fly.

Even before that, let's take a preliminary glance at the complete passage to see what job it's doing. Paul is explaining in more detail why he wants to come to Rome. As part of this explanation, he is also spelling out in more detail the effect of the **gospel** he has laid out in verses 1–7. He is coming to Rome as a herald of God's gospel; this is part of his job, because the gospel is for everyone. He doesn't need to be ashamed of it,

because it is God's power to save people; and it does this by unveiling God's justice, God's age-old plan to put the world, and human beings, to rights.

But why should Paul say he is 'not ashamed' of the gospel? In today's Western world, people are often ashamed of the Christian gospel. It is so often mocked, sneered at and dismissed in newspapers, and on the radio and TV, that many Christians assume they had better keep their **faith** secret. That, of course, is just what is wanted by the triumphalist secular world around us. But in Paul's day there was a different challenge. As we have already seen, his world was dominated, and the Roman church in particular was to be dominated, by a culture focused on one city and one man. Caesar claimed to rule the world; God's gospel claimed that Jesus did. What was a Christian to do? Practise the faith in private in case it offended someone? Certainly not. Paul may have had in mind a passage like Psalm 119.46: 'I will speak of your decrees before kings, and I shall not be ashamed.' That was what he intended to do. 'At the name of Jesus,' he wrote in another letter, 'every knee shall bow' (Philippians 2.10). That included Caesar.

Paul may, in fact, be gently teasing the pride of Rome. The Greeks, who had ruled the world centuries before the Romans, divided the world into two: Greeks and the rest. They called the rest 'barbarians', probably because their languages sounded like meaningless mumblings compared with the liquid music of Greek. And, for a true Greek, the Romans with their Latin language counted as barbarians. Yes, Paul says in verse 14; and I have an obligation to them as well!

But it is a different division of the world that occupies him for much of this letter. Jews divided the world into two: Jews and the rest. They referred to the rest sometimes as 'the nations', sometimes as '**Gentiles**', and sometimes, as here and in chapter 2, 'the Greeks', because as far as they were concerned the rest of the world was Greek-speaking. (Rome, with its many immigrant populations, had a large number of Greek-speakers, including most of the early Christians.) One of the most explosive things about Paul's gospel, rooted as it was in the Jewish scriptures and traditions, is that it broke through the barrier between Jew and Greek and declared that the saving love and power of the one God was available equally to all. That is central to this little passage, and it remains central throughout the letter.

Now it's time to do our 'exploded' diagram of the key sentences in verses 16 and 17, and see what each bit means and how it all fits together.

We begin with the **good news** as God's power. Paul has already spoken of God's power raising Jesus from the dead, demonstrating that he really was and is God's son (verse 4). Now he speaks of power again, but

it's a power which goes on working wherever people like Paul, or anyone today with the same commission, declare that Jesus is Lord. Paul has discovered, through years of actually doing it, that when you announce Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord of the world something *happens*: the new world which was born when Jesus died and rose again comes to fresh **life** in the hearts, minds and lifestyles of the listeners, or at least some of them. This isn't magic, though it must sometimes have felt like that. It is God's power at work, through the faithful announcement of his son.

The result is 'salvation'. This is such a well-known word that we can easily assume we know what it means and then take it for granted. The meaning we normally assume is 'going to **heaven** when we die'. But the New Testament in general, and Paul in particular, have almost nothing to say about that. Yes, of course, they believe that God will rescue all his people from death. Death is a defeated enemy, and its corruption and decay will not have the last word. But this means, not that we'll all end up in a disembodied heaven, but that God will rescue the entire creation from corruption and decay – and that he will give all his people new bodies, like Jesus' risen body, to live gloriously within his new world. That is one of the places the argument of the letter is going, as a glance at chapter 8 will confirm. But this 'salvation', as Paul often makes clear, isn't only in the future, though that's where its full glory will be seen. It makes its way forwards into the present, rescuing people from the state of sin, and rescuing God's people from trouble and persecution. 'Salvation' is a present reality as well as a future hope. Indeed, when this salvation breaks into someone's life it becomes an event in itself to which they can then look back in the past. They were saved; they are being saved; they will be saved.

This salvation is for everyone who believes. The gospel **message** – that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord of the world – needs to be *believed*. Paul's word for 'believe' and his word for 'faith' are basically the same, and together they are bigger than our words 'believe' and 'faith' usually seem. If someone says 'Is it raining?' and I say 'Well, I believe so', an element of doubt creeps in: do I actually *know* it? Of course, Christian faith means grasping things we can't see or prove. But faith is the opposite of doubt, not just of sight! It means a settled conviction that God has raised Jesus, and that he is indeed Lord of the world (see 4.24 and 10.9). This conviction is the first thing that happens when the gospel message strikes home, in the power of the **spirit**, into a human heart. And with it goes God's promise, which is one of the main themes of the letter, that those who believe the gospel are declared to be 'in the right' *with immediate effect*, in advance of the final day of judgment (see 3.21–31). This is why membership in God's

people is available, on exactly equal terms, for ‘the Jew first, and also the Greek’.

Verse 17 contains – as we continue the ‘exploded’ diagram of the passage – the most explosive idea of all. The prophets and psalms had often spoken of God’s ‘justice’: God is the creator of the world, and longs to put the world (as we say) to rights. Their word for justice, and similar ones like ‘justify’, and their word for ‘right’, and others like ‘righteous’, ‘righteousness’ and so on, came from the same root. Unfortunately, as with ‘believe’ and ‘faith’, there isn’t an easy way of expressing this in English. Part of the art of reading Romans is learning, when you see one of the words in the group, to hold the others in your mind as well.

God’s justice is in fact, at bottom, quite an easy idea to grasp. If God made the world and still rules it, why do bad things happen? Is God going to do anything about it? The biblical answer is yes: of course God will do what is required to put it right; but then things get complicated. God doesn’t do what we expect. He calls out a single family and enters into a loving, binding agreement with them. This agreement, often called a ‘**covenant**’, doesn’t mean they are the only people God loves or wants to rescue. Rather, it means that the way God has chosen to bring his rescuing justice to the world, the way he intends to put everything to rights, is by calling this one family, the people of Abraham, to be the bearers of his plan to rescue the rest of the world as well. *God’s covenant with Abraham was always intended as the means by which the creator God would rescue the whole world from evil, corruption and death.* God intends to keep to this purpose and this promise, so that he can bring his restorative justice to the whole world. That is, in the end, what ‘God’s righteousness’ or ‘God’s justice’ means. I have translated the word as ‘God’s covenant justice’ here in order to hold all these ideas together. As it’s one of the central themes in the letter, it’s vital that we get it straight.

When the gospel of Jesus is announced, then, Paul declares that through it we can see at last how God’s ‘justice’, his ‘covenant faithfulness’, or in older language his ‘righteousness’, have been unveiled. *This is how God has put the world to rights*, declares the gospel message about Jesus, *and this is how God will put you to rights as well!*

Once again, Paul insists – the fact that he repeats this idea twice in two packed verses shows how important it is – that in order to benefit from the unveiling of God’s covenant justice, his faithfulness in Jesus to the promises he made long ago, it is necessary that you yourself have faith. God has been faithful to his purposes and promises; if you want to benefit from this, you must have an answering faithfulness, that ‘believing obedience’ he spoke of in verse 5. To back this up, Paul quotes a key passage from the prophet Habakkuk (2.4), who was faced

with a great catastrophe coming on Israel and had to learn to hold on and trust God, to have faith in his faithfulness. That is the position he now urges on his readers. In Jesus the **Messiah**, God has shown himself faithful to his covenant purposes and promises, and those who believe the good news about Jesus will find that this faithfulness reaches out and embraces them with a salvation which can never be taken away. When we put the passage back together again, it stands before us, at the head of this great letter, as a short summary of some of the most important truths ever heard by human ears.

ROMANS 1.18–23

Humans Reject God and Embrace Corruption

¹⁸For the anger of God is unveiled from heaven against all the ungodliness and injustice performed by people who use injustice to suppress the truth. ¹⁹What can be known of God, you see, is plain to them, since God has made it plain to them. ²⁰There are, of course, things about God which you can't see, namely, his eternal power and deity. But, ever since the world was created, they have been known and seen in the things he has made. As a result, they have no excuse: ²¹they knew God, but didn't honour him as God or thank him. Instead, they learned to think in useless ways, and their unwise heart grew dark. ²²They declared themselves to be wise, but in fact they became foolish. ²³They swapped the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of the image of mortal humans – and of birds, animals and reptiles.

I have just watched a large copper beech tree being felled. It was a difficult and dangerous job for those engaged in it, and I was fascinated to see how they went about their work, with ropes and other climbing equipment as well as chain saws. But I was still more interested to see what only came into view after the great trunk had fallen and was being cut up into sections to be taken away.

The tree had to come down, so we were told, because its roots were rotten. To look at the tree you wouldn't have known there was anything much wrong. If you'd looked closely at the upper branches you might have noticed a few signs of ill health. There was a certain amount of fungus growing around the base, but (so I thought) lots of trees have that, don't they? It was a big tree, about two hundred years old, and most of it looked fine. No, said the experts, that fungus is killing off the root system. Another year or so, and the roots wouldn't hold the tree against a high wind. It might be dangerous. So down it had to come.

I hadn't been completely convinced. I wondered if they were making a fuss about nothing. But then, as the saws did their relentless

work, I saw the inside of the trunk. It was about four feet across. The outer two or three inches were solid, good strong wood. But the rest of the trunk was stained a dark, mottled pattern. The rot in the roots had started to spread inside, up to a height of ten or fifteen feet. Before much longer it would have infected the entire tree. What looked to the casual passer-by as a fine, solid old beech would have become a serious accident waiting to happen.

Paul's explanation for why the **gospel**, the unveiling of God's justice and salvation, is urgently required is that the tree is rotten to the core, and might come crashing down at any minute. The tree in question is the human race as it has worked itself into rebellion against its creator at every level. Humans were always designed to be central to God's plan to rule his creation: that's part of what it means to be made 'in God's image' (Genesis 1.26–27). So when humans go wrong, the world as a whole is put out of joint. That Paul has this wider salvation in view is clear from the climax in Romans 8. But for now he concentrates on the central feature of the problem: human rebellion. From verse 18 right through to 2.16, he lays out a charge against the human race in general: humankind is rotten at its heart, and the eventual crash to which this will lead (1.32; 2.5; 2.16) is anticipated in the signs of corruption, disintegration and decay which we can see, so to speak, in the upper branches (1.24–31). Our present passage, verses 18 to 23, rightly begins with the rotting of the roots themselves.

Human beings were made to know, worship, love and serve the creator God. That always was and always will be the way to healthy and fruitful human living. It demands, of course, a certain kind of humility: a willingness to let God be God, to celebrate and honour him as such, and acknowledge his power in and over the world. Paul affirms that human beings have not lost this sense of God's power and deity, but he declares that they have chosen to suppress this truth, instead of honouring God and giving him thanks. It is important to remember this passage, since Paul will refer back to it when he describes in chapter 4 how the **faith** of Abraham, and of Christians, does in fact give God this honour and gratitude, thus revealing itself as the sign of the renewal of human beings. All trees are affected by the disease of the root; but the disease can be cured, and Paul will explain how.

Here he describes graphically how the disease spreads. What begins with humans suppressing the truth about God continues not, as we might suppose, with evil behaviour – that will come later – but with distorted *thinking* and a darkened *heart* (verse 21). This is the sobering truth which many philosophers have tried to ignore: there are healthy ways of thinking and unhealthy ways of thinking. Thought, all by itself, will not necessarily produce the right answers. By itself, human reason

can no more be guaranteed to tell us which way to go than a compass in a room full of strong magnets. One of the tragedies of rebellious humankind is the sheer waste of God-given intellectual powers: think of the clever criminal working out cunning, detailed plans to commit the crime and escape undetected, or the clever dictator thinking how to crush opposition, to keep people in the dark as to his real selfish motives, and to stay in power. Fancy using your God-given thinking power for purposes like that.

Along with twisted thinking goes the darkened heart (some translations say ‘minds’ at the end of verse 21, but Paul uses his regular word for ‘heart’). The human heart was seen by many ancient thinkers as the centre of motivation. It ought to be a source of light; but when humans rebel against God, it becomes dark. This is the fungus at the core of the root. The tree can still grow, perhaps for many years; it may deceive onlookers into supposing it is healthy; but it has already contracted a deadly disease.

Humans can deceive themselves, and one another, about this disease. As Paul points out in verse 22, they can claim to be wise while in fact being foolish. This is one of the puzzles of our own day, where in a world of easy global communication we can see what people are thinking in cultures and settings very different from our own. One person thinks the greatest wisdom is for a country to have an enormous stock of nuclear weapons. Another person thinks this the height of folly. One person thinks the wisest thing is for old or infirm people to be helped to commit suicide. Another person thinks this is the very opposite of wisdom. How can we tell?

Paul will answer that question too, but for the moment the important thing is to notice the underlying point, which he repeats in verse 32: it is quite possible for humans to claim that doing one thing is good and wise, and doing the opposite is bad and foolish – and to be exactly wrong. This doesn’t mean that all moral standards are relative, that it’s simply a matter of cultural preferences. Rather, it’s a sign that we do indeed very easily deceive ourselves, especially where our own interests and desires are concerned.

The first sign of the creeping death that spreads upwards from twisted thinking and a darkened heart into the rest of the human life in question is the failure of worship. We are made to worship the living God and to bear his image. Paul, who clearly has Genesis 1 in mind, points out with heavy irony that humans have instead created idols which are at several removes from reality. They represent the image of human beings, who are themselves mortal, subject to decay and death. Not content with that, they also worship images of sub-human species.

It’s easy for people today to laugh at ancient idolatry. How funny they were back then, people think. They carved ‘gods’ out of wood

and stone and worshipped them! But of course we do the same. The modern Western world has worshipped many idols, the most obvious being money, sex and power. Paul is not saying that every individual does all of this, but rather that the human race as a whole worships parts of the world rather than God himself. Twisted thinking, a darkened heart, and worship of non-gods: this is the disease, often unseen by the casual bystander, which will bring down the tree and anyone standing in the way.

This takes us back to the first verse of the passage. God's justice stands over against ungodliness and injustice, two terms which sum up what it means for human beings to go wrong. 'Ungodliness' refers to what happens when humans fail to worship, honour and thank the living God. 'Injustice' quickly follows, in the broad sense of human life and society getting out of joint, needing to be put to rights. Truth is an early casualty in war; it is also an early casualty when humans rebel against God.

The result is God's anger, or as many translations still have it, 'wrath'. This does not mean that God is malevolent, capricious, liable to lose his temper and lash out wildly. Quite the reverse. As we shall see in chapter 2, God is kind, patient and forbearing. But he cares passionately about his world, and his human creatures; and if there are types of activity which deface, damage and destroy the world and human beings, God will not let them go on for ever. Rape, murder, torture and economic oppression – the list could go on, and indeed will go on later in the chapter: God hates them all. He is angry about them all. Let's be quite clear: *if he were not, he would not be a good God*. He is not in the business of saying that the tree is perfectly all right when in fact it has a fatal disease.

Nor is Paul. There are two mistakes we can make when we think about evil. Either we can imagine the world is completely wicked, so that there are no glimmers of goodness at all. Or we can think that evil isn't really as serious as all that. Our modern Western society has tended to take the second line, despite generations of wickedness on an unparalleled scale. Paul takes us back to a more realistic assessment. The tree is indeed dangerously diseased, and needs radical treatment.

ROMANS 1.24–27

Unclean Desires, Dishonoured Bodies

²⁴So God gave them up to uncleanness in the desires of their hearts, with the result that they dishonoured their bodies among themselves.

²⁵They swapped God's truth for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed for ever, Amen.

²⁶So God gave them up to shameful desires. Even the women, you see, swapped natural sexual practice for unnatural; ²⁷and the men, too, abandoned natural sexual relations with women, and were inflamed with their lust for one another. Men performed shameless acts with men, and received in themselves the appropriate repayment for their mistaken ways.

Imagine someone who knows nothing of music coming across a violin bow. It would be very puzzling. It has obviously been carefully made, they might think; but what is it *for*? It's too narrow to be a kind of polishing implement; it's too delicate to be for practical jobs around the house or garden. It's even got a little screw to adjust it to make the hair tighter or slacker . . . what on earth are you supposed to do with it?

Only when someone produces a violin, picks up the bow and begins to play will the mystery be solved. By itself, you'd never have guessed that the bow was for that kind of work, still less what beautiful sounds it could produce. Equally, you would almost certainly not have guessed, from looking at the violin by itself, how it was to be played. And yet for centuries they have been made for one another. Only when they are together will either of them be complete.

Already I can feel several of my readers becoming edgy. All illustrations are incomplete and inadequate, and this one is no better than most others. Of course males and females are not like bows and violins. Of course there is a sense in which a male can be complete – as Jesus himself was complete! – without a female, and vice versa. Of course the male is more than a bow and the female different from a violin, and vice versa. Yet the illustration catches something of what Paul assumes as he begins to explain how human life has been distorted away from the creator's intention. There is no non-controversial way of getting at this whole topic. We may as well launch in and see what Paul is saying.

Throughout this passage he has in mind one particular biblical passage, namely Genesis 1–3. You might have thought that if he had been going to describe ways in which humans had gone against God's intention he would have done better to begin with something like the Ten Commandments. Well, he returns to them later (notably in 13.8–10). But, as we shall see, there are problems about Israel's **law** which make it less than adequate for his present purposes. He wants to trace the way in which humans have violated, not simply a 'law' given at some point in human history, but the very structure of the created order itself.

Paul assumes that there *is* such a structure; that is, that creation is not random or arbitrary. Taking Genesis 1 as the primary theological statement, he sees humans created in God's image and given charge over the non-human creation. Humans are commanded to be fruitful:

they are to celebrate, in their male-plus-female complementarity, the abundant life-generating capacity of God's good world. And they are charged with bringing God's order to the world, acting as stewards of the garden and all that is in it. Males and females are very different, and they are designed to work together to make, with God, the music of creation. Something deep within the structure of the world responds to the coming together of like and unlike, something which cannot be reached by the mere joining together of like and like.

This helps to explain the otherwise baffling fact that the very first instance Paul gives of what he sees as the corruption of human **life** is the practice of homosexual relations. Why on earth, we think, would he single out this particular behaviour and place it at the top of the list? The answer is not simply (as many have suggested) that as a Jew he was particularly disgusted by this behaviour, which many pagan cultures accepted, and indeed celebrated, but which Judaism had always banned. Nor is it merely that the emperor, Nero himself, was known to indulge in homosexual practice, as well as various types of bizarre heterosexual behaviour, and that Paul may have wanted to point the finger at the imperial system and its rotten, immoral core. This may have been a small part of his intention, but it is certainly not his central point.

Nor is it the case, as is sometimes suggested, that in the ancient world homosexual relationships were normally either part of cult prostitution or a matter of older people exploiting younger ones, though both of these were quite common. Homosexual 'marriages' were not unknown, as is shown by the example of Nero himself. Plato offers an extended discussion of the serious and sustained love that can occur between one male and another. The modern world has put various names on this phenomenon ('homosexual' or 'gay'; and its female counterpart, 'lesbian'). These imprecise labels refer to a wide range of emotions and actions which it would be foolish to think only came to light in recent generations.

Paul's point, then, is not simply 'we Jews don't approve of this', or, 'relationships like this are always unequal and exploitative'. His point is, 'this is not what males and females were made for'. Nor is he suggesting that everyone who feels sexually attracted to members of their own sex, or everyone who engages in actual same-sex relations, has got to that point through committing specific acts of idolatry. Nor, again, does he suppose that all those who find themselves in that situation have arrived there by a deliberate choice to give up heterosexual possibilities. Reading the text like that reflects a modern individualism rather than Paul's larger, all-embracing perspective. Rather, he is talking about the human race as a whole. His point is not 'there are some exceptionally wicked people out there who do these revolting things' but 'the fact that such clear distortions of the creator's male-plus-female intention

occur in the world indicates that the human race as a whole is guilty of a character-twisting idolatry'. He sees the practice of same-sex relations as a sign that the human world in general is out of joint.

This out-of-jointness, he says, is the result of God allowing people to follow lust wherever it leads – once they have lost their grip on God's truth and, like Adam and Eve in the garden, listened to the voice of the creature rather than the voice of God (this seems to be what he has in mind in verse 25). When, later, he describes Abraham's **faith** and its results (4.18–22) he is deliberately showing how the problems of chapter 1 have been undone through humans trusting God and once more giving him glory. Only when we look at this larger context can we see the deep underlying points Paul is making. Only when we do that can we avoid the shallow readings of this passage that have, unfortunately, made discussion of a complex subject more difficult even than it already is.

Paul repeats 'God gave them up' (verses 24 and 26; it comes again in verse 28). When God gives human beings responsibility he means it. The choices we make, not only individually but as a species, are choices whose consequences God, alarmingly, allows us to explore. He will warn us; he will give us opportunities to **repent** and change course; but if we choose idolatry we must expect our humanness, bit by bit, to dissolve. When you worship the God in whose image you are made, you reflect that image more brightly, and become more fully and truly human. When you (and by 'you' I mean the human race as a whole, not simply individuals) worship something other than the living God, something that is itself merely another created object, and hence subject to decay and death, you diminish that image-bearingness, that essential humanness.

This is not, of course, the last word on the subject of homosexuality. Paul has only written two verses on it at this point, hardly enough for us to deduce more than a little of any fuller position he might have stated. But beyond the polemic and rhetoric that fly to and fro on this topic, we find, here and elsewhere in the New Testament, not a set of arbitrary rules, but a deep theology of what it means to be genuinely human, and a warning about the apparently infinite capacity of human beings for self-deception.

ROMANS 1.28–32

Darkened Mind, Darkened Behaviour

²⁸Moreover, just as they did not see fit to hold on to knowledge of God, God gave them up to an unfit mind, so that they would behave inappropriately. ²⁹They were filled with all kinds of injustice, wickedness,

greed and evil; they were full of envy, murder, enmity, deceit and cunning. They became gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, arrogant, self-important, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹unwise, unfaithful, unfeeling, uncaring. ³²They know that God has rightly decreed that people who do things like that deserve death. But not only do they do them; they give their approval to people who practise them.

Some years ago I attended a prize-giving at a local school. The headmaster made an entertaining speech, in the course of which he read out, without telling us who had written it or when, a long description of how the younger generation was going to the dogs. They didn't respect their elders; they showed no concern for cultural life and traditions; they only cared about pleasure; they were rude and slovenly and ignorant and lazy. Eventually he told us that the passage had been written by someone in the fifth century BC, in Athens.

It is strangely comforting to know that our perceptions of the world getting worse and worse are probably the result of our increasing knowledge rather than other people's increasing wickedness. Throughout recorded human history the world has been full of tears as well as laughter, of human folly and evil as well as wisdom and kindness. And I have to say that when I translated the list of human failings set out in this passage I had a strange sense of recognition. *I know these people*, I thought. *I read about them in the newspaper, and sometimes I meet them in the street.* In fact, *I had an email from someone like that just now.* But that's not the most worrying thing. The really alarming fact is that sometimes I see a person like that not out in the street but when I look in the mirror. The line between good and evil runs, not between 'us' and 'them', but down the middle of each of us. (If we aren't clear on that point, Paul will remind us of it at the start of the next chapter.)

The three middle verses (29, 30 and 31) give us the details, some of them literally gory. We hardly need comment on most of them; they speak for themselves. But, to get the full flavour, try asking yourself: how would you feel if you lived in a village where all the people were like that? Miserable, I should think. You would want to move house. Behaviour such as this is inherently destructive, both of itself (we may have met people who have made one of these characteristics their speciality, and have become a hollow shell, consisting now only of gossip, boasting or whatever) and of those whose lives it touches. There is no joy being with people like that. There is no chance of genuine human community. C. S. Lewis once wrote a description of **hell** as a place where people move further and further apart from each other. Read this list, imagine people who embodied these qualities and nothing else, and you can see why.

But the really striking things about this grisly little paragraph are the beginning and the end. Once again, Paul asserts that ‘God gave them up’. This is what human **life** looks like when God says, ‘All right, do it your own way.’ What happens then is that human *thinking*, not just human behaviour, begins to deconstruct altogether. ‘God gave them up’, he says, ‘to an unfit mind’ – corresponding to the fact that they ‘did not see fit’ to hold on to a true knowledge of God. We still sometimes suppose that bad behaviour comes from a victory of body over mind, but Paul knows better. Evil is what you get when the mind is twisted out of shape and the body goes along for the ride.

That’s why the last verse of the chapter is so chilling. People sometimes imagine it’s a bit of a let-down. ‘But not only do they do them; they give their approval to people who practise them.’ Surely, we think, doing them is the really bad thing, not passing moral comment?

But we’d be wrong. Imagine you’re visiting a prison and meet two men who have committed murder. The first one is penitent.

‘I knew it was wrong at the time,’ he says, ‘but I was so angry I did it anyway. Now I have to live with the fact that I know I did a very wicked thing.’

‘You’re just a wimp,’ says the second. ‘We live in a rough old world. Who cares about right and wrong? I did the sensible thing when I killed that stupid old man. He was a waste of space. The world is better off without him. The judge should have given me a medal instead of locking me up.’

Whose world would you rather live in? Is it not much, much worse to live in a world where evil is praised and good is scorned than a world in which, though people do evil, they still know it’s wrong?

All this points to the critical statement: they know God’s decree, that those who do things like that are, literally, ‘worthy of death’. Don’t misunderstand. People suppose God’s laws are arbitrary. They imagine that God (if such a being exists, they might add) has invented a set of rules to amuse himself, and that he then enjoys the thought of punishing people if they don’t keep them. The ultimate in that league was the emperor Caligula, who used to have new laws written in small letters and pinned so high on a wall that nobody could see them. Then he’d punish people for breaking them.

But to imagine that God and his laws are even remotely like that is itself part of the distorted thinking of which so much of the world has been guilty. The ‘decrees’ of God are not that kind of thing at all. They are built into the fabric of creation itself. Evil behaviour is inherently destructive. It points, like a signpost, towards death. This is obvious in the case of murder and other violence; it should be almost as obvious in the case of gossip and slander, where someone’s reputation and

life are pulled to pieces, often without any chance of redress. People who are self-important and boastful are effectively pushing themselves into space belonging to others, as though the others shouldn't really exist. And so on. God has made the world in such a way that kindness, gentleness, generosity, humility – love in all its many forms – is life-giving, while evil in its many forms is deadly. The steady process of corruption which Paul chronicles in the repeated 'God gave them up' of verses 24, 26 and 28 is not itself ultimate death. That, as the final condemnation of sin, is spoken of in the next chapter. What we see in Romans 1 is the chilling sight of future death casting its dark shadow forwards into the present. If we recognize even part of the picture, we ought to be all the more eager to see what kind of a solution Paul is going to propose as the letter moves forwards.

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