

January 1 Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus,
called, chosen, to be an apostle,
set apart for the gospel of God,
promised through the prophets
written in the holy scriptures.

It is about God's Son.
Humanity and Holiness
He was born a descendent of David.
He was declared to be the Son of God
in power through the Holy Spirit
by being resurrected from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Through him we have received grace and apostleship
to lead people of all nations to faith, for the sake of his name,
including yourselves who are called to belong to Christ.

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- * How are you called to lead to faith those who do not now know of Jesus? Paul writes, "including yourselves." What does that call mean to you?
- * Ponder Christ's humanity. Stand in awe of Christ's holiness. Meditate on these things.
- * Remember your own call in your baptism. How is your call rooted in Christ's death and resurrection? Through whom and through what experiences has God called you to discipleship?

Gracious God, thank you for the call through Jesus' death and resurrection to lead people through your holy scriptures to know Christ and to know him more deeply. May we remember our callings and receive with thanksgiving your blessings of grace and peace. Amen.

January 2 Romans 1:8-15

First: I thank God through Jesus Christ
for all of you because your faith is proclaimed
throughout the world.

God, whom I serve by announcing the Gospel,
knows I pray for you without ceasing.

*For whom do you pray? For whom do you thank God?

I long to see you, to share a spiritual blessing to strengthen you,
so that we will be mutually encouraged,
you by my faith and I by yours.

*Whom do you long to see? How do you help each other in faith?

Many times I had planned to visit you, but something always came up.

*What was Paul planning to do? How were his plans interrupted?
*What do you plan to do? What "comes up" instead?

I have an obligation to all peoples: educated and uneducated,
citizen and stranger, insiders and outsiders.

*Among whom are you called to serve?
*To whom might you be called to minister who is outside your "sphere of influence"?

I am eager to proclaim the Gospel also to you who are in Rome.

*What can't you wait to get up in the morning to do?

O God of eagerness, fill us with joy, courage, and perseverance for your ministry beyond our own narrow boundaries. Center our selves, our words, our teaching, and our proclamation on Christ. Fulfill our longings to be with those whom you have given us to love and put into our care. In Christ Jesus, Amen.

January 3

Romans 1:16-17

The heart of salvation:
I am not ashamed of the gospel.
I have complete confidence.

It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.
God's power to save all who believe,
The saving power of God.

To the Jews first and also Gentiles
first those in this faith and all beyond.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.
The gospel reveals how God rights wrong.
It is through faith from beginning to end.

As it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."
Scripture says, "The person who is put right with God through faith shall live."

* Justified through faith. Whatever translation, no matter how many ways or times we say it, this verse is key. What does this mean? What does this mean for you? What does this mean for ministry?

O Saving God, we give thanks for Jesus Christ in whom humankind is put right with you and with one another. Let us not be ashamed but filled with confidence, from beginning to end. Justified by grace through faith, fill us with new life for mission and ministry. Amen.

January 4

Romans 1:18-32

The wrath of God is revealed against ungodliness. Through wickedness the truth is suppressed. They see God and God's eternal power and divine nature through what God has created. They are without excuse. But in knowing God, human beings did not bestow honor or give thanks. Senseless and futile thinkers, claiming to be wise, but really foolish, they worshiped their own idols. Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Even the women pervert the natural use of their sex by unnatural acts. In the same way, men give up sexual relations with women and burn with passion for each other.

Therefore, we became ensnarled in all kinds of
wickedness, covetousness, and evil.

* By grace with God's insight, what do you want to hide that you now see? Envy, murder, strife? Deceit, craftiness, gossip? Slander, hatred of God, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness? Evil, rebellion, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness? What do you see in yourself?

* How deeply are we enmeshed in evil? How do human beings not only practice ungodliness but applaud it?

O God of holiness and righteousness, may we trust you enough to really see the evil in which we participate. We do deserve judgment. Let us know that fully and yet not stay mired in evil but trust your power of salvation even more. With eyes wide open, give us the strength and compassion to minister among real human beings and to face systemic evil with the power of the Christ who died that all might live. Amen.

January 5 Romans 2: 1-11

Therefore, you have no excuse,
whoever you are, when you judge others;
for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself,
because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

- * Have you noticed that the very thing that irritates us about another's sin may be that which we secretly do, are tempted to do, or are afraid we will do?
- * Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?
- * Do you despise the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience?
Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

By your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself.
God will repay according to each one's deeds.
To those who by patiently doing good seek for glory, honor and immortality,
God will give eternal life;

There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil
but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good,
the Jew and also the Greek

God shows no partiality.

God of judgment, judge me also. Open my heart that I may see my sin more clearly than I imagine I see the sin of others, including both those I love and those I despise. In the death and resurrection of Christ, lead me to repentance, free me from self-seeking, and empower me for love. Amen

January 6 Romans 2: 12-16

All who have sinned apart from the law
will also perish apart from the law,
and all who have sinned under the law
will be judged by the law.

It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight,
but the doers of the law who will be justified.
When Gentiles, who do not possess the law,
instinctively do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves.

They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts,
to which their own conscience also bears witness.
Their conflicting thoughts will accuse or excuse them
on the day when God through Christ will judge the secret thoughts of all.

- * What is the role of conscience?
- * How do we relate to and live among "Gentiles"...people outside *our* church?
- * How does this passage help explain the dilemma Christians experience when people who are not Christian do good (better?) works?

O Good and Gracious God, thank you for including all people in your caring concern. Keep us from so quickly judging ourselves righteous and our neighbor unrighteous. You know our secret thoughts. Fill us with new life which comes from Christ alone that we may not be merely hearers of the Word, but doers. In Jesus name and for his sake we pray. Amen.

January 7 Romans 2:17-29

If you call yourself a religious person and boast in your relationship to God, if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you who teach others, will you not teach yourself?

* The passage goes on. Hard questions. Harder consequences. While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You who detest idols, you who boast in keeping the law, do you not dishonor God? And in the end, because of us, those who have not yet come to faith speak evil of God.

A person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

*Oh, we say we do not trust in the law and surely not in the mark of circumcision. Well, then, what rituals, what marks of the faith have...or could....become merely outward signs? Where is your heart?

God of all honesty, reveal to us what is so clearly revealed to you: who we really are and what our actions show forth. Free us from self-justifying entanglement in the law. Turn us from needing to seek praise from people, that we may teach and preach and serve and lead with you alone as our guide. Set our hearts and minds on you alone, Christ Jesus. Amen.

January 8 Romans 3: 1-8

So, then, if it is true that people of faith cannot be distinguished through marks and rituals of their beliefs (yesterday's reading),

What advantage is there to being a religious person?

Paul says:

Much,
in every way,
because the people of God are entrusted with the message of God.

Ah, but now watch the mental contortions (with answers below):

Questions and Answers from the Text:

* If we are unfaithful, will our unfaithfulness negate the faithfulness of God? *No, God is true (even though every person is a liar).*

* What if our doing wrong serves to show up more clearly God's doing right? Should we say that God is unjust to punish us? *By no means! If God were unjust, God could not judge the world.*

* If our falsehood makes God's truthfulness stand out more clearly, why are we still being condemned as sinners? *Hmm....there doesn't seem to be an answer for that in the text.*

* So why not do evil so that good may come? *Good question, at least a common question. Some people do insult us by saying that's what we say. They will be condemned.*

Patient, truthful God, keep us from being entangled in our questioning of you. You alone are both righteous and merciful. May our questions lead not to excuses but to deeper understanding. Let our thanksgiving be that which frees us to reach out with your unbounded love. In your name we pray. Amen.

January 9 **Romans 3:9-20**

Both Jews and Gentiles are under the power of sin.
There is no one who is righteous, not even one.
There is no one who has understanding.
There is no one who seeks God.

All have turned away from God.
Together, they have become worthless.
There is no one who shows kindness.
There is not even one.

They use their tongues to deceive.
Their speech is filled with bitterness.
Their feet are swift to shed blood.
Ruin and misery are in their paths.

They have not known the path of peace.
They have no fear of God.
The law speaks to those who are under the law
so that every mouth may be silenced
and the whole world may be held accountable to God.
“No human being will be justified in God’s sight” (Ps. 143:2)
by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

* How does knowing that no one is righteous both make us despair and also move us away from judgment of people by background or circumstance?

* How does having no fear of God keep us under the power of sin and away from the path of peace?

God of mercy, we know that we are all under the law. We stand silent, unable to justify ourselves in your sight. Hold us accountable. Use your law to bring us the full knowledge of our sin that we might fully know our need for Christ Jesus’ cross and resurrection, in Christ’s name alone we pray. Amen.

January 10 **Romans 3:21-26**

Apart from the law, God’s justice has been brought to light.
The law and the prophets both bear witness to it.
This is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ
for all who believe.
God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ.

There is no distinction, since all have sinned
and fall short of the glory of God;
they are now justified by grace as a gift,
through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
whom God put forth as sacrifice of atonement by his blood
effective through faith.

God did this to demonstrate justice, because in divine forbearance
God had passed over the sins previously committed.
It was to prove that God is righteous
and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

* What does the image of God’s saving action in Christ, as a “sacrifice of atonement,” mean to you?

* How does knowing that in “divine forbearance” God has “passed over” our sins provide an image and an energy for merciful ministry?

* What is the relationship of justification to justice in our ministry among those who are oppressed?

Thank you, God of grace and mercy, for your immeasurable love in Christ Jesus who through his death on the cross has given us life and salvation. By the Spirit, fill us with faith which empowers us for ministries of reconciliation, justice, and life-giving love. Amen.

January 11 **Romans 3:27-31**

What then becomes of boasting?

It is excluded.

By what law is it excluded? By that of works?

No, but by the law of faith.

A person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Is God the God of Jews only?

Is God not the God of Gentiles also?

Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one.

God will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith
and the uncircumcised through the same faith.

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?

By no means!

On the contrary, we uphold the law.

* Consider one of your Christian practices (praying, reading Scripture, regular giving, working for justice), and ponder how, as good as that is, God excludes our boasting, and includes those people who do not do the practice. Surely we understand that. But do we really?

* Consider: The Law serves as curb, to curtail sin and wrongdoing. The Law shows us our sin, puts it to death on the cross that we might rise with Christ, and in faith by the power of the Spirit, be reconciled to God and to one another. Law and Gospel!

* Consider how the Law, then, becomes friend and guide, as through faith we are empowered for ministries of reconciliation.

*God of all righteousness, through the law, may we see our need for mercy.
God of the cross and resurrection, ground us in your grace.
God of new life, may we serve in your world through faith alone. Amen,*

January 12 **Romans 4:1-8**

If justified by works, then Abraham has something to boast about
but not before God.

What does Scripture say?

“Abraham believed God, and because of this faith
God accepted him as righteous.” (Genesis 15:6)

To anyone who works, wages are not counted as a gift
but as something due.

But to those without any work to their credit,
who trust God who justifies the ungodly,
such faith is counted as righteousness.

David speaks of blessedness of those whom

God looks upon as righteous apart from works:

“Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

Blessed are those for whom the Lord lays no guilt to their account
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” (Psalm 32:1-2)

* Do you trust God in the wage-earning and in the credit-counting? What does it mean to you that we cannot boast in our works? How do you experience God’s blessing in your daily life both in and apart from your work?

Righteous God, we confess that we do boast (or at least we want to feel good) about what we have done. Not that we have not worked hard and done good things, but we lay before you our need to be justified by such work, the self-righteousness that too easily turns us into judges of others. Our very self-deception exposes us. You alone forgive sin. You alone provide faith. Fill us with this faith that we may trust you alone. Enliven this faith that we might be energized for service. In Christ we pray. Amen.

January 13 Romans 4:9-12

This blessedness, this happiness, was it pronounced only
on those who had been circumcised?

No, indeed, the joy of this great blessing
of a right relationship with God belonged
also to those who were not circumcised.

Abraham believed God
and because of his faith, God accepted him as righteous.
When did this take place? Was it before or after he was circumcised?
It was before, not after.

Circumcision was a sign.
Circumcision was a seal.
A seal of righteousness through faith.

Abraham was circumcised to become also the ancestor
of all who believe without being circumcised,
to live the same life of faith that Abraham lived
before he was circumcised.

* Paul asks: was faith given before or after Abraham was circumcised? If faith
is a gift and the ritual a sign and seal, how do we today view our rituals of
marking God's gift of faith?

* When today we baptize in the name of the Triune God, is not this entrance
into Christ's body, the church, also a sending forth to pronounce God's
righteousness to all?

*God of Abraham and Sarah, God of the prophets and apostles, God of the
disciples and descendants of those blessed with the gift of faith through the
centuries, give us, too, this faith, and include us, too, in your signs and seals of
righteousness. Mark us to be your messengers in the world, in Christ. Amen.*

January 14 Romans 4:13-15

When and why did God promise Abraham and his descendants that the world
would belong to him? (Genesis 17:4-6; 22:17-18)

The promise that Abraham would inherit the world did not come to him
or to his descendants through the law,
but through the righteousness of faith.

If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs,
faith is null and the promise is void.

The law brings wrath, but where there is no law,
neither is there violation.

* Imagine what it would be like in your life if all your blessings had to come
by keeping God's law. Imagine your life without God's gift of faith.

* Imagine your teaching, proclamation, leadership, care-giving, and worship
were it based on what people had to do to receive God's promises. Imagine
mission and ministry without God's gift of faith.

*God of unconditional love and covenant faithfulness, we cannot imagine our
calling to be your people in mission apart from your bringing us to faith in
Christ Jesus. May our ministry be based on your promises alone. Call forth
faith among the people you have called us to serve. In Christ's love, Amen.*

January 15 **Romans 4:16-25**

All depends on faith so that the promise may rest on grace
and be guaranteed to all Abraham's descendants,
not just to those who adhere to the law,
but also to those who share the faith of Abraham,
for he is the ancestor of all of us, of many nations. (Gen. 17:5)

God gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.
Hoping against hope, Abraham believed that he would become
"the father of many nations," according to what was said to him.
He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body,
which was as good as dead and also Sarah's barrenness.

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God,
but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.
He was fully convinced that God was able to do what God had promised.
Faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6) and also for us.
God raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,
who was handed over to death for our sins
and raised for our justification.

- * Faith! It all depends on faith, not on clinging to the law. Paul says this again and again. Just how hard is it to totally grasp that and to cling to faith alone?
- * Ponder Judaism, Christianity and Islam, three great faiths that trace Abraham as their ancestor. How well do people of these three faiths understand one another? Dialog with one another? What might we all do to increase understanding and cooperation in this pluralistic world?

God of grace, may we hope against hope in the face of what seems impossible so that your love for all might be shared among all nations through words of understanding and works of justice. May our ministries be faith-filled and life-giving, in the name of Jesus, the risen Christ we pray. Amen.

January 16 **Romans 5:1-5**

Therefore...

* After many days of devotions in which we have been drowned by the law, we can breathe again... inspired anew by the great Reformation Mantra:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand;
and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings,
knowing that suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope,
and hope does not disappoint us,
because God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

- * Justification and faith? Yes, that we've heard many times.
Justification and peace? What does that mean?
Justification in which we stand? Boast? In our Hope of sharing God's glory?
- * But to "boast in our sufferings" could be misused.
So how and why and when (or not) does suffering produce endurance,
which produces character, which produces hope?

Hope, by the love of God though the outpouring of the Spirit will not disappoint us. In you, O God, we hope! Amen.

January 17 Romans 5:6-11

While we were helpless,
at the right time
Christ died for the ungodly.

* How weak, how helpless have you been? At the right time in history Christ came. Have there been situations in your life when Christ's death for the ungodly was the "right time"?

Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—
though for a good person someone might actually dare to die.

God has shown us how much we are loved by God.
While we were still sinners Christ died for us.
Now that we have been justified by Jesus' blood,
we will be saved through Christ from the wrath of God.

* How much we are loved by God! While we were still...
While we are still sinners, Christ's death is for us.
What does being saved from the wrath of God mean to you?

If while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through Jesus' death,
much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by Jesus' life.
Much more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
through whom we have received reconciliation.

* "Much more surely!" How much reconciliation have you seen and experienced through Jesus the Christ? Living fully in the new life in Christ, how much more ministry of reconciliation is Christ ready to give through us?

We thank and praise you, reconciling God, for salvation, for deliverance from the wrath of God, for new life, for our communal calling to ministries of reconciliation in our families, in our churches, in our world. In the name of Christ who died for us all. Amen.

January 18 Romans 5:12-14

Sin came into the world through the Adam, the first human beings.
Death came through sin.
Death spread to all,
because all have sinned.

Sin was in the world before the law.
but sin was not counted before there was a law to break.
Death ruled over all, from Adam to Moses.
Adam is a type of the one who was to come.

* It is not just each person's sin that harms and kills, but systemic sin, the corrosive effects of oppressive systems, communal violence and lasting hatreds. How do you see death ruling in our own lives and in the entire history of humankind?

* "Sin came through one." How do we think about "original sin"? What about those who are "without" this law of Moses? If death ruled (exercised dominion) between the time of the earliest humans and when the law was given through Moses, is not sin the human condition for all?

* In this all-encompassing passage we see just a hint of Christ's coming. Why is it crucial in our ministries in the world that we see and present Jesus Christ's death and resurrection as reconciling all sin, even the most outrageous? How does this help people receive salvation in Christ?

Great God of all, we live in the hope, the promise, the assurance of our new reconciled life in Christ. In that assurance open our eyes to the true depth of the consequences of the sinfulness of human kind. Move us beyond the assurance of our own forgiveness to courageous work for justice in the face of systemic sin. Amen.

January 19 Romans 5:15-17

God's free gift is not like the sin of the Adam.
Many people died because of the first sin.
But God's grace is so much greater.
It is God's free gift to so many people
through the grace of the one person, Jesus Christ.

And there's a difference between God's gift and the first sin.
After the first sin came the judgment "Guilty."
After so many sins comes the undeserved gift of "Not guilty."

Through the first sin, death began to rule.
All who receive God's abundant grace
will freely rule in life through Christ.

* So, what's the difference between sin and grace?
All the difference in the world.
What's the difference in your world?

* How does sin still spread and consume and bring death? How does God's free gift of grace in Jesus Christ bring life in and through you and your faith community? How might it?

O God of new life, fill us with the power of your Spirit that grace might grow, and the rule of sin and death might diminish. We thank and praise you for Jesus Christ, the one in whom there is life and life abundant! Amen.

January 20 Romans 5:18-21

Just as one person's sin condemns all,
so Jesus' act of righteous brings justification and life for all.
Just as by one person's disobedience many were made sinners,
so by Jesus' obedience the many will be made righteous.

Where law intruded.
sin multiplied.
Where sin increased.
grace abounded all the more.

Just as sin ruled through death,
so grace rules by justification
leading us to eternal life
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

* Paul goes on, emphasizing his point in as many ways as possible. What, then, is his point? That if we had fewer laws we would have fewer law-breakers? Surely not. But how do you see this reasoning at work in the world?

* How does awareness of – understanding of – God's law, increase your awareness of the profound and pervasive way that human sinfulness infects every human encounter with God, with each other and with the earth itself?

* As that sinful infection leads to death, so surely God's grace and mercy and love now permeate these relationships with life forever. Think of one specific instance of God's mercy multiplying. Take quiet time to give thanks.

No matter how many times we have heard it, gracious God, your justification by grace in Jesus Christ is hard to comprehend. Increase our understanding. Increase our faith. Empower the spark of eternal life in us even now. Challenge us that our ministries of liberating life might overflow into all the world. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

January 21 **Romans 6:1-11**

Should we continue to sin so that God's grace may abound?
By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?

We who were baptized into Christ Jesus
were baptized into his death.

We have been buried with him by baptism into death
so that just as Christ was raised from the dead,
so we too might walk in newness of life.

* How foolish, you say, that we keep sinning so God can keep forgiving! But how do you see that happening every single day?

* Why do we baptize? Why was Jesus baptized? Just as through Jesus' baptism he was plunged into his ministry which led to the cross and resurrection, ponder how in our baptism we are joined to Christ's death and new life.

If we have been united with Christ in a death like his,
we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.
Our old self was crucified so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin.
We are freed from sin.

If we have died with Christ, we believe we will also live with him.
We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again;
death no longer has dominion over him.
The death he died, he died to sin, once for all;
the life he lives, he lives to God.

You are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

* What does it mean for you that you were crucified with Christ and freed from enslavement to sin? Dead to sin and alive to God?

Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, may we cling to your cross and rise with you each day to new life for mission and ministry. Amen.

January 22 **Romans 6:12-19**

Sin must no longer rule.
Do not present any part of yourselves as instruments of wickedness,
but rather present yourselves to God
as people who have been brought from death to life,
and present yourselves to God as instruments of righteousness.
Sin will have no dominion over you,
since you are not under the law but under grace.

* What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? Don't you know that when you surrender yourselves as slaves to obey someone, you are slaves of the master you obey, either sin, or righteousness?

Thanks be to God that you have become obedient
from the heart to that which you have been taught
and that you, having been set free from sin,
have become slaves of righteousness.
Just as you once presented yourselves as
slaves to impurity for greater and greater iniquity,
now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

* What is the reason you want to refrain from sin? If you ask that question in the general public, what do you think people will say?

* Slavery is a strong term. How are we enslaved to sin, both individually, and collectively through oppressive systems?

* What does it mean to present ourselves as "slaves" to righteousness for sanctification?

O Ruler of the Universe, free us from being ruled by wickedness and from wanting to be. Thanks be to you, O God, for liberating us for a righteous relationship with you and with people whom we have been called to lead and to serve and with the world itself. In Jesus Name, Amen.

January 23 Romans 6:20-23

When slaves of sin, you were free from the control of righteousness.
And what was the advantage of that? Nothing but shame and death.

But now you are free from the commands of God
and bound to the service of God.
Your gain, your advantage, is sanctification, holiness,
life fully dedicated to Christ.

* The key component of sanctification for Paul is being freed to live a holy life in Christ. What are you “freed from” and what are you “freed for”?

* What does sanctification, the life “bound to the service of God” look like? Reflect on some stories of human life in the service of God that you have witnessed. What do those stories reflect back to you now for your own life?

The wages of sin is death,
but the free gift of God is eternal life
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

* Romans 2:23 may be one of the most popular billboard sign and bumper sticker Bible verses of all time. What do you think it says to people who have seen only this one verse of Scripture? Having delved into Romans what does this verse say to you?

Sanctifying God, make us also holy. Each day free us again from the entanglements of sin that you might bring to life in us your very holiness. And in Christ's holiness, call us again, call us anew to your service in ministry and mission. Amen.

January 24 Romans 7:1-6

Do you not know, brothers and sisters
that the law binds only in this lifetime?

A married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives.
If he dies she is discharged from the law concerning her husband.
Accordingly, she is an adulteress if she lives with another man
while her husband is alive.
But if her husband dies, she is free from the law.
If she marries another man, she is not an adulteress.

In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law
through the body of Christ
so that you may belong to the one who has been raised from the dead
and bear fruit, not for death but for God.
Now we are dead to that which held us captive.
We are slaves not under the old written code
but in the new life in the Spirit.

* How has this analogy, of comparing a woman belonging to her husband to no longer belonging to the law but to Christ, been used to assert that wives belong to their husbands? How does belonging to Christ actually set women *and* men (Paul addressed both brothers and sisters) free from oppressive systems of human ownership to enter into mutual relationships of love and commitment?

* Paul says he is speaking to “those who know the law.” In teaching people about the profound nature of “being dead to that which held us captive” to live in the life of the Spirit, what images and analogies might we use today?

Set us free, Christ Jesus, so that we no longer put ourselves or one another under codes of oppression and death, but claim life in the Spirit to bear fruit for you. Amen.

January 25 Romans 7:7-13

What should we say?
That the law itself is sinful?
By no means!

Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known what sinfulness is.
I would not have known what it is to covet
if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”
Sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment,
produced in me all kinds of covetousness.

Apart from the law, sin lies dead.
With the commandment, sin sprang to life, and I died.
Sin, seizing an opportunity, deceived me and killed me.

So the law is holy,
and the commandment is holy and just and good.
Did what is good bring death to me? By no means.
It was sin working death in me through what is good
in order that sin might be shown to be sin.

*A central use of the law is that sin not only shows us our sin but puts it to death on the cross. How is it that when sin springs to life, the commandments kill me and I die? Why is that necessary, given the deceptive nature of sin?

* “Do not covet” is the commandment used in this passage. Paul might have used a different commandment. Why this one?

God of righteousness, we dare to thank you for your law and for the commandments which shine a spotlight on our sin and the systemic sin of all humankind that we might see the deceptiveness of sin and our own susceptibility and culpability. Let us see even more clearly the brightness of the babe in the manger and the risen Christ. Amen.

January 26 Romans 7:14-25

I do not understand my own actions.
I do not do what I want.
I do everything I hate.

If I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good,
But it is no longer I that do it, but the sin that dwells within me.
I know that nothing good dwells within me.

I can will what is right,
but I cannot do it.

I do not do the good I want,
but the evil I do not want is what I do.

If I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it,
but sin that dwells within me,
So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good,
evil lies close at hand.

* How is the old excuse “The devil made me do it” different from “It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me”?

* Do I, can I, “delight in the law of God inside myself”? Do I feel “another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to sin”?

* Who will rescue me from this body of death?

So then with my mind I am a slave to the law of God,
But with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Thanks be to you God who through Jesus Christ, our Lord has and is continually rescuing me and all Christians from our slavery to sin so that we may live in a new right relationship with you and with one another. Amen.

January 27
Romans 8:1-11

Therefore
There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
The law of the Spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death.
God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.
God sent God's own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to deal with sin.

Those who live according to the flesh
set their minds on the things of the flesh,
but those who live according to the Spirit
set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit,
since the Spirit of God dwells in you.
Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.
But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin,
the Spirit is life because of righteousness.
The one who raised Jesus from the dead
will give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit within you.

* "Flesh" has many sordid connotations. What does Paul mean by, "flesh"?

* "Flesh" and "Spirit" does not mean body vs. spirit. Christ *came* in the body in wholeness with the spirit. Consider this contrast: **To set the mind on the flesh is death but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.**

* What is your hope and trust in knowing that the one who raised Christ from the dead also gives life to your mortal body now and for all eternity?

Risen Lord Jesus, we thank you for taking on flesh that we might no longer be trapped in the sin which corrupts and corrodes but be filled with your own Spirit which brings life to our bodies. Help us use this new life to share this Good News near and far and to be engaged in life-giving ministries throughout the earth. Amen.

January 28
Romans 8:12-17

Brothers and sisters,
we are not obligated to live according to the flesh.
If you live according to the flesh, you will die;
If by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.
You did receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,
but you have received a spirit of adoption.

We cry "Abba!"
It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit
that we are children of God.
If children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ
if we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

* Many congregations refer to themselves as a "family," but "family" is not prominent among the dozens of images of the church in the New Testament. What images of kinship do we have in this text? What radical, counter-cultural relationships is God creating?

* How are the people one leads also their brothers and sisters? How are the children of parents also their sisters and brothers?

* To adopt a child is to commit oneself to a lifetime relationship of love and care. What does it mean to you to be adopted by God?

* What images do you have of being an heir? A "joint" heir? And what does it mean to also be an heir of his suffering for the sake of the world?

Abba, parenting-God, we thank you for the Spirit which bears witness in and through us. May we be your faithful adopted children and heirs of your promise and mission, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

January 29 Romans 8:18-25

The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing
with the glory about to be revealed to us.
For the creation waits with eager longing
for the revealing of the children of God.
The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will
but by the will of the one who subjected it
in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;
and not only the creation, but we ourselves,
who have been the first fruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly while we wait for the adoption,
the redemption of our bodies.

In hope we were saved.
Now hope that is seen is not hope.
For who hopes for what is not seen?
But if we hope for what we do not see,
we wait for it with patience.

* Picture creation groaning in labor pains. What is the bondage to decay from which it will be set free? What is our role in this anticipation?

* Have you ever been in labor? We already have been given the first fruits of the Spirit, and now we wait, in the groans of labor, for adoption. What does that mean in you?

* What is your hope? Your deep hope in Christ?

God of all hope, in the midst of the world's suffering, shape our anticipatory leadership that we may be midwives of the future, caregivers of creation, as the body of Christ bringing forth fruits of the Spirit. Amen.

January 30 Romans 8:26-30

The Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
God who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that in all things God works for the good
among those who love God,
and are called according to God's purpose.

* How have you heard this one verse taken out of context in an attempt to give a too-quick answer to those who suffer? In the full context of Romans how do you understand this verse? What deep comfort is here?

Those whom God knew from the start, God set apart
to be shaped in the image of the Son
so Christ would be the first of many beloved children –
Those whom God predestined God also called;
those whom God called God also justified;
those whom God justified God also glorified.

“predestined” “called” “justified” “glorified”

* What does it mean to be “predestined”? To be “justified”? Christians for centuries have divided themselves over the use of those terms. How do you understand being chosen by God? What does being made right with God mean to you? What these words mean for you in your call to discipleship?

God who calls all people to yourself, open our arms that we might share the good news that is beyond our comprehension that you have made the world right with yourself. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ may we find salvation and hope, patience and purpose to love you, and serve you, and glorify your most holy name. Amen.

January 31

Romans 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things?
If God is for us, who is against us?
Will the God who gave all of us Jesus Christ
not also give us everything else?
Who will bring anything against God's chosen people?
God justifies. Who is to condemn?
Christ Jesus died and was raised.
who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us.
Who then will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine,
or nakedness, or peril or sword?

As it is written, "for your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered." (Ps. 44:22)
No, in all these things we are more than conquerors
through Christ who loved us.

**Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
Nor things present, nor things to come,
Nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
Nor anything else in all creation
will be able to separate us
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

*What then can we say, O God? Thank you! On this very day when we worry
about so many things, when we grieve, when we suffer, when we ache for the
oppressed, we place ourselves in your loving care, and there we will stay
forever. Amen.*