



LITTLETON  
BIBLE  
CHAPEL

## What We Affirm

*A Doctrinal Statement on the Gospel, Justification, the Law, and the Future of Israel*

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# Preface

This document sets out what we and the historic eldership of Littleton Bible Chapel believe Scripture teaches on the gospel, justification by faith, the nature of righteousness and faith, the meaning of works of the law, the theme of Romans, the role of the Mosaic law in the new covenant age, the obligations of Jewish and Gentile believers, and the future of Israel. We state these convictions positively, unanimously, grounded in Scripture, and supported by the work of careful evangelical scholars whose handling of these texts we trust and commend to this assembly. The scholarly summaries below describe the positions these authors are known to hold and teach in the referenced works. We commend these resources to anyone who wants to understand where we stand and why.

## The Theme and Central Argument of Romans

We believe the letter to the Romans is Paul's most comprehensive exposition of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that its central argument answers the question: how can a guilty sinner stand righteous before a holy God?

*"If You, Lord, were to keep account of guilty deeds, Lord, who could stand?"*, Psalm 130:3

Paul states his theme in Romans 1:16–17:

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'* **Romans 1:16–17**

The letter opens by establishing that the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness (Romans 1:18), that both Gentile and Jew stand equally under condemnation (Romans 1:18 through 3:20), and that the whole world is accountable to God with every mouth stopped (Romans 3:19). This universal diagnosis of the human condition before a Holy God is not a side issue—it is the foundation of the letter and drives everything that follows. In Romans 3:21 through 5:21 Paul then announces and explains the solution: God provides the righteousness we lack. This righteousness is credited to us apart from the law and without any human work, and is received through faith in Jesus Christ, whose sacrifice on the cross satisfied God's righteous wrath against our sin. Because of Christ's work, God issues a forensic declaration of justification, legally declaring believing sinners righteous by grace, those whom God chose in Christ before the foundation of the world and whose names are written in the book of life.

Romans 6 through 8 unfolds the sanctifying transformation that flows from justification through union with Christ, freed from sin's dominion, and given life by the indwelling Spirit. Romans 9 through 11 defends the faithfulness of God despite Israel's widespread rejection of her Messiah. Romans 12 through 16 apply the gospel to the life of the community.

The center of Paul's message is Romans 3 through 5, because that is where the gospel's answer to the human problem is stated, grounded, and defended. We believe Romans 9 through 11 is essential to Paul's argument and not a parenthesis, because it answers the

question whether God can be trusted to keep His word. If God has abandoned Israel, no person's justification is secure. But Romans 9–11 shows that God has not abandoned His promises. These chapters function as the theodicy (a defense of God's righteousness, justice, and faithfulness in the presence of Israel's unbelief and divine judgment) that supports the forensic gospel, not its replacement. The primary question the letter answers is how a sinful human being is declared righteous before a Holy God? And the answer is justification by grace alone, through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, grounded in His atoning blood, through the crediting of His righteousness to the believer, apart from works.

### Scripture References

Psalm 130:3; Romans 1:16–17; Romans 1:18; Romans 1:18–3:20; Romans 3:19; Romans 3:21–5:21; Romans 6–8; Romans 9–11; Romans 12–16.

*Thomas Schreiner, in his commentary on Romans in the Baker Exegetical Commentary series, argues that the theme of Romans is the gospel itself, defined as the power of God for salvation to all who believe, and that the righteousness of God in the letter refers to the righteous standing God gives to the ungodly as a gift received through faith in Christ. He treats Romans 1–8 as the doctrinal core that establishes how sinners are justified, with Romans 9–11 functioning as the defense of God's faithfulness within that larger argument.*

*Douglas Moo, in his Romans commentary in the New International Commentary on the New Testament series, contends that Romans is organized around the question of how human beings can stand in right relationship before God, and that Paul's answer, the forensic declaration of righteousness through faith in Christ, is the letter's controlling theme from chapter 1 through chapter 8, with chapters 9 through 11 addressing the corollary question of Israel's place in that plan.*

*John Piper, in The Justification of God, argues that Romans 9 through 11 is written to demonstrate that God's word has not failed, and that this demonstration is in service of the larger gospel argument: the God who justifies the ungodly by faith can be trusted because He is sovereign in mercy and faithful to His promises.*

**Recommended Resources:** Thomas Schreiner, Romans (BECNT, Baker Academic, 1998); Douglas Moo, The Letter to the Romans (NICNT, Eerdmans, 2018); John Piper, The Justification of God (Baker, 1983); Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans (Pillar, Eerdmans, 1988); John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans (NICNT, Eerdmans, 1959)

## The Righteousness of God, *Dikaiosynē Theou*

We believe that the phrase "the righteousness of God" (*dikaiosynē theou*) in Paul carries a double weight: it refers to God's own righteous character and to the righteousness He gives to the believer as a gift.

Both dimensions are present and neither can be set aside without distorting Paul's argument. Paul himself provides the interpretive key within the same letter. In Romans 1:17 he introduces the phrase "The righteousness of God" reveals God's own righteousness, justice, and faithfulness, but Paul immediately applies it to the sinner's standing before God and quotes

Habakkuk 2:4: "But the righteous one will live by faith". This shows that Paul is not merely speaking about God's covenant faithfulness, but also about the individual sinner's standing before God, received through faith. Romans 3:21–22 makes this even clearer: "through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe," showing that the righteousness of God is something the believer receives through faith. Romans 4 then unpacks this at length through the example of Abraham:

*To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness... David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works. Romans 4:5–6*

The verb *logizomai*, to count or credit, appears eleven times in Romans 4. It is the language of a transaction in which something moves from outside the believer to the believer's account. This righteousness is alien to the believer, not produced by them. Romans 5:17 and 5:19 confirm what is transferred:

*...those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ... so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Romans 5:17, 19*

The righteousness that justifies is the righteousness of Christ's obedience, given as a free gift, received by faith. 2 Corinthians 5:21 states it with precision:

*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21*

We become the righteousness of God. It comes to us from outside. It belongs to us not because we produced it, but because Christ is our righteousness, and in union with Him, His obedience is credited to our account. Philippians 3:9 captures this from Paul's own first-person perspective:

*...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. Philippians 3:9*

## Scripture References

Romans 1:17; Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 3:21–22; Romans 4:5–6; Romans 5:17, 19; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:9.

*John Piper, in Counted Righteous in Christ, argues that the righteousness of God in Romans refers both to God's own righteous character and to the righteous standing He provides and credits to the believing sinner. He contends that reducing the phrase to divine covenant faithfulness alone loses the gift dimension that Romans 3:22 and Romans 4 immediately supply, and that imputed righteousness is the exegetical conclusion the text demands.*

*Thomas Schreiner, in his Romans commentary, argues that dikaiosynē theou in Romans 1:17 and 3:21–22 refers to the righteous standing God gives to believers as a gift, and that Paul's extended argument in Romans 4 about the crediting of faith as righteousness is his own commentary on what he means by the phrase. Schreiner treats both dimensions, God's righteousness as attribute and as gift, as present and necessary to Paul's argument.*

*Douglas Moo, in his Romans commentary, argues that the righteousness of God in Romans has both a subjective dimension, God's own righteous character, and a gift dimension, the righteous status God bestows on the believer. He contends that these two dimensions belong together and that the gift dimension is essential to Paul's argument about how sinners stand before God.*

**Recommended Resources:** John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Crossway, 2002); Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT, Baker Academic, 1998); Douglas Moo, *Romans* (NICNT, Eerdmans, 2018); Brian Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness* (Crossway, 2006); John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1955)

## Justification, The Forensic Declaration of the Guilty as Righteous

We believe that justification is a forensic act of God—in other words, a legal declaration made by God as Judge, in which He declares the believing sinner righteous on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness received through faith. It is a legal verdict, not a moral transformation. The sinner is not made inherently righteous in their character by justification; they are declared righteous in their standing before God's tribunal. This distinction between the forensic act of justification and the subsequent work of sanctification is essential to the biblical account and to the assurance of every believer.

Paul establishes the forensic nature of justification in Romans 3:19–20, where he frames the human problem in the language of a courtroom: every mouth stopped, the whole world accountable to God, no human being justified in God's sight by works of the law. The solution in Romans 3:21–26 is correspondingly judicial: God publicly displayed Christ as a propitiation, demonstrating that He is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 4:5 makes the forensic character explicit: it is God who justifies the ungodly. The one declared righteous is ungodly. The declaration is not a recognition of existing righteousness but a verdict that credits an alien righteousness to the one who believes.

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1*

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1*

No condemnation is an acquittal. It is the verdict of a court from which there is no further appeal. Romans 8:33–34 makes the judicial structure unmistakable:

*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died, more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Romans 8:33–34*

The language of charge, justification, and condemnation is the language of a courtroom where a verdict has been rendered and cannot be reversed. The ground of this verdict is the imputed righteousness and obedience of Christ. The instrument through which it is received is faith. The result is a standing before God as secure as the righteousness of Christ Himself, because it is His righteousness that constitutes the believer's standing. We affirm imputation because Paul's

own language in Romans 4 requires it. The verb *logizomai* describes a crediting of something to someone's account. What is credited is righteousness. Since the sinner does not possess that righteousness, it must come from outside, and Romans 5:19 names its source: the obedience of the one man, Jesus Christ.

### Scripture References

Romans 3:19–20; Romans 3:21–26; Romans 4:5; Romans 5:1; Romans 8:1; Romans 8:33–34; Romans 5:19.

*Thomas Schreiner, in Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification, argues at length that justification in Paul is a forensic declaration, not a transformative infusion. He grounds this in the Old Testament background of the judicial term, in Paul's own use of the courtroom metaphor throughout Romans, and in the contrast Paul consistently draws between working and believing, between earning and receiving. Schreiner contends that imputation is not a Lutheran imposition but the exegetical conclusion that the counting language of Romans 4 demands.*

*John MacArthur, in The Gospel According to the Apostles and in his Romans commentary, consistently teaches that justification is a legal declaration in which God pronounces the guilty sinner righteous on the basis of Christ's righteousness credited to them. He argues that this forensic understanding is not optional but is the meaning of the Greek verb *dikaioo* throughout Paul's letters, where it functions as the judicial opposite of condemnation.*

*R.C. Sproul, in Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification, argues that the Reformation's recovery of forensic justification and imputed righteousness was a recovery of Paul's own teaching, not an innovation. He contends that the righteousness by which the believer stands before God is an alien righteousness, belonging to Christ and credited to the believer through faith, and that any addition to the instrument of faith imports human performance into the basis of standing before God.*

*D.A. Carson, in his contributions to Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates, argues that the doctrine of imputed righteousness is grounded in Paul's argument in Romans 4 and 5, where the language of crediting and the contrast between Adam's disobedience and Christ's obedience both point toward a transfer of righteousness from Christ to the believer. Carson contends this is an exegetical conclusion, not confessional import.*

**Recommended Resources:** Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Zondervan, 2015); R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Baker, 1995); John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Crossway, 2002); Brian Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness* (Crossway, 2006); D.A. Carson and Mark Husbands, eds., *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates* (IVP Academic, 2004); John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1955); Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (P&R, 2004)

## The Nature of Saving Faith: Trust, Not Allegiance

We believe that saving faith is the empty-handed trust in Jesus Christ and in His finished work as the sole ground of righteousness before God by a guilty sinner. Faith is the instrument through which justification is received, not the basis on which it rests. It contributes nothing to

the standing it receives. It is directed entirely outward toward Christ and toward what He has accomplished, not inward toward the quality of the believer's own loyalty or performance.

Paul's own description of saving faith in Romans 4 is definitive:

*Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. Romans 4:4–5*

The one who is justified is not the one who works for righteousness, but the one who believes in God who justifies the ungodly. The faith that receives justification is explicitly distinguished from working for righteousness. It is the posture of complete cessation from performance before God and complete reliance on Christ. Ephesians 2:8–9 confirms: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Faith itself is not the ground of boasting—it is the gift through which grace is received.

We believe that genuine saving faith necessarily produces obedience, love, and fruit over time, as James 2:14–26 and the whole of New Testament ethics make clear. A faith that produces no fruit is not saving faith, because true faith does not remain alone; it bears the fruit of obedience. But the fruit is not part of the instrument of justification. It is the evidence that the instrument is real. The Reformation distinction between faith alone as the instrument of justification and the good works that necessarily follow is not a theological technicality. It is the difference between a gospel in which the guilty sinner rests entirely in Christ's finished work and a gospel in which the sinner's ongoing performance contributes to or conditions their standing before God.

On the *pistis Christou* (faith in Christ) constructions in Paul's letters, we believe the objective genitive reading is exegetically stronger in context: these phrases refer to the believer's faith in Christ, not to Christ's own faithfulness as the grammatical subject. The ground of justification is Christ's faithfulness and obedience. The instrument by which that ground is appropriated is the believer's faith directed toward Christ. Both are true and both are present in Paul's argument, but they are distinct. Conflating them by making *pistis* mean Christ's faithfulness in these constructions removes the visible instrument through which the guilty sinner receives what Christ has accomplished, leaving the mechanism of reception unclear precisely where Paul is most concerned to clarify it.

*...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. Philippians 3:9*

Faith here is the instrument by which Paul receives a righteousness that is not his own. The two things are distinct: the righteousness received and the faith through which it is received. When faith is defined as allegiance or ongoing fidelity, the instrument becomes a performance, and the renunciation of self-reliance Paul describes in Philippians 3:7–9 is undermined.

## Scripture References

Romans 4:4–5; Ephesians 2:8–9; James 2:14–26; Philippians 3:7–9; Philippians 3:9.

*Thomas Schreiner, in his Romans commentary and in Faith Alone, argues that pistis in Paul functions as receptive trust directed toward Christ as its object. He holds the objective genitive reading of pistis Christou, contending that Paul's argument in Romans requires a visible human response, trust directed toward Christ, as the instrument through which the righteousness of God is received. Schreiner also argues, against the allegiance framework, that while genuine faith inevitably produces obedience, the obedience is the fruit and not the instrument.*

*Douglas Moo, in his Romans commentary, argues for the objective genitive reading of the pistis Christou constructions and contends that Paul's argument requires faith understood as trust in Christ, not as Christ's own faithfulness, because Paul immediately speaks of all who believe as those who receive the righteousness of God. Moo treats faith as the receptive instrument that looks away from the self and toward Christ.*

*John Piper, in The Future of Justification, argues that faith saves not because of its quality or constancy but because of its object. He contends that when faith is redefined as allegiance or fidelity, the empty-hand character of saving faith is compromised, and the assurance that belongs to the one resting in Christ's finished work is replaced by uncertainty about the steadiness of one's own loyalty.*

*Thomas Schreiner, in Faith Alone, argues that sola fide means faith alone is the instrument of justification, not faith plus faithfulness or trust plus allegiance, and that any addition to the instrument imports human performance into the basis of standing before God, which is precisely what the Reformation recovered from Paul and precisely what must be defended today.*

**Recommended Resources:** Thomas Schreiner, Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification (Zondervan, 2015); Douglas Moo, Romans (NICNT, Eerdmans, 2018); John Piper, The Future of Justification (Crossway, 2007); Matthew Barrett, Faith Alone (Zondervan, 2019); Moises Silva, 'Faith Versus Works of Law in Galatians,' in Justification and Variegated Nomism, vol. 2 (Baker, 2004); Guy Prentiss Waters, Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul (P&R, 2004)

## Works of the Law, The Universal Scope of Paul's Argument

We believe that the phrase “works of the law” (*erga nomou*) in Paul cannot be restricted to ethnic boundary markers alone. More precisely, the phrase refers to deeds done in obedience to the law, but Paul’s argument extends the principle to all human performance as the ground of justification. While the immediate context of Paul’s argument in Romans and Galatians involves specific practices of the Mosaic covenant, circumcision, Sabbath, and dietary laws, that marked Israel as a distinct people, Paul’s argument universalizes beyond those specific practices to the entire category of human performance before God. Restricting *erga nomou* to Jewish ethnic identity markers alone does not account for the full scope of Paul’s argument, especially in Romans 4:4–5, where Paul moves from boundary markers to the broader contrast between working and believing as the basis of righteousness before God.

Romans 3:19–20 also establishes this scope plainly:

*Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. **Romans 3:19–20***

Every mouth. The whole world. No human being. This is not a statement about a first-century ethnic dispute. It is a statement about every person in every generation before God. The conclusion Paul draws from this universal condemnation is that no human being is justified by works of the law, because the law's function is to produce knowledge of sin, not to produce righteousness. Galatians 2:16 makes the universal scope explicit in the structure of Paul's own sentence:

*Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. Galatians 2:16*

Paul says "we", Jewish believers—those with every covenantal advantage—have found that even they cannot be justified by works of the law. Paul repeats this three times in one verse to leave no ambiguity. Galatians 3:10–11 confirms the universal reach:

*For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.' Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.' Galatians 3:10–11*

The curse falls on everyone who relies on law-performance and fails to do all things written in it. The quoted text from Deuteronomy 27:26 speaks of comprehensive obedience to everything in the law. This is the universal human problem: no person can meet the law's full demand, and every person relying on law-performance stands under its curse. Christ redeems from this curse by becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13), and that solution is as universal as the problem.

## Scripture References

Romans 3:19–20; Romans 4:4–5; Galatians 2:16; Galatians 3:10–11; Deuteronomy 27:26; Galatians 3:13.

*Thomas Schreiner, in The Law and Its Fulfillment, argues that works of the law in Paul cannot be restricted to Jewish boundary markers. He contends that Paul's own argument in Romans 3:19–20 and Galatians 3:10–11 universalizes the principle, no human being is justified before God by any form of law-performance, and that the ethnic dimension is present in Paul's immediate context but the theological conclusion reaches every human being in every generation.*

*Douglas Moo, in his Romans commentary, contends that the boundary-marker reading captures something true about Paul's immediate context but fails to account for the full scope of his argument. He argues that Romans 3:19–20 addresses the whole world and that Paul's conclusion that no human being is justified by works of the law has universal reach that goes beyond first-century ethnic disputes.*

*Simon Gathercole, in Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5, argues from careful examination of Second Temple Jewish texts that the picture of first-century Judaism as uniformly covenantal-nomist and non-merit-seeking is historically insufficient. He demonstrates that patterns of boasting before God on the basis of obedience appear in multiple strands of Jewish literature, and that Paul's argument in Romans addresses this genuine human tendency.*

*Stephen Westerholm, in Perspectives Old and New on Paul, argues that whatever diversity existed within first-century Judaism, Paul's argument in Romans and Galatians addresses the universal human tendency to seek righteousness before God through performance, and that his conclusions are not limited by the specific contours of any particular historical community's self-understanding.*

**Recommended Resources:** Thomas Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* (Baker, 1993); Douglas Moo, *Romans* (NICNT, Eerdmans, 2018); Simon Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting?* (Eerdmans, 2002); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul* (Eerdmans, 2004); Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law* (IVP, 1994); Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (P&R, 2004)

## Christ as the End of the Law, Romans 10:4

We believe that Romans 10:4 teaches that Christ is the end (telos) of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. The word telos can mean goal, fulfillment, or termination, and these dimensions are not mutually exclusive. Even the word *Torah*, commonly translated “law” or “instruction,” is related to a Hebrew root that can carry the idea of directing or pointing toward a target; in that sense, the law points beyond itself to God’s holy standard, ultimately fulfilled in Christ, who alone perfectly hits the mark by fulfilling the righteousness the law reveals, bearing the curse the law pronounces, and becoming righteousness for everyone who believes. Christ is the goal toward which the law always pointed and the termination of the law as any instrument of achieving righteous standing before God. The phrase “for righteousness” (*eis dikaiosynēn*) is decisive: Christ is the end of the law specifically in the domain of producing right standing with God. This is broader than the termination of Torah as an ethnic boundary marker. In Romans 10:4, Paul is not merely saying that Christ ends the law as a badge of Jewish identity; he is saying that Christ brings to an end every attempt to use the law, or any human performance, as the basis for righteous standing before God.

*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. Romans 10:4*

The context of Romans 10 confirms this reading. Paul has described Israel's failure to submit to the righteousness of God (10:3), pursuing instead their own righteousness through Torah. Christ's coming as the telos of the law means that the era in which Torah was the instrument by which righteous standing was sought has been brought to its conclusion. The book of Hebrews provides the most sustained treatment of what this means for the Mosaic administration as a system:

*For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. Hebrews 7:12*

*In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear. Hebrews 8:13*

This is the language of completion and consequent conclusion, not of mere adjustment. The Mosaic administration, its priesthood, its sacrifices, its specific ordinances, has been brought to its appointed end in Christ, not because it was deficient in itself, but because it was always typological, pointing to the reality that has now arrived. Romans 7:6 states the believer's covenantal position accordingly:

*But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. Romans 7:6*

We affirm the eschatological vision of the prophets, including Isaiah 2:2–3, which speaks of the word of the Lord going forth from Jerusalem in the Kingdom age. That future vision is real and we hold it with conviction. But the future Kingdom is distinct from the present new covenant age. What Hebrews, Galatians, and Romans describe is the current age, in which the Mosaic administration has been fulfilled and concluded.

## Scripture References

Romans 10:4; Hebrews 7:12; Hebrews 8:13; Romans 7:6; Isaiah 2:2–3.

*Douglas Moo, in his Romans commentary, argues that Romans 10:4 teaches that Christ is the end of the law in the sense of both its fulfillment and its termination as the means of righteousness. He contends that the phrase *eis dikaiosynēn* shows that what has ended is the law's function of producing right standing before God through human performance, and that this conclusion is broader than the mere termination of Torah as an ethnic boundary marker.*

*Thomas Schreiner, in both his Romans commentary and *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, argues that Christ as the *telos* of the law for righteousness means the law's role as the instrument by which people sought to be justified before God has been brought to its end in Christ, and that the law pointed to Christ as the One who fulfills what it pointed toward and concludes what it required.*

*John MacArthur, in his Romans 9–16 commentary, argues that Christ is the end of the law for righteousness in the sense that the Mosaic system, with its sacrifices and ordinances, has been fulfilled and set aside, and that believers now live under the new covenant in which the righteous requirements of the law are written on the heart by the Spirit rather than imposed as an external covenantal obligation.*

**Recommended Resources:** Douglas Moo, *Romans* (NICNT, Eerdmans, 2018); Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT, Baker Academic, 1998); Thomas Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* (Baker, 1993); John MacArthur, *Romans 9–16* (Moody, 1994); Frank Thielman, *From Plight to Solution* (Brill, 1989)

## The Mosaic Law and the New Covenant

We believe that the Mosaic law was a gift from God, holy and righteous and good (Romans 7:12), given to Israel at Sinai as the governing covenantal structure for the people of God in that redemptive-historical period. It was never designed to save. Justification has always been by faith, as Abraham's example in Genesis 15:6 demonstrates, before the law was given. The law's purposes were to reveal sin (Romans 3:20), to function as a guardian pointing toward Christ (Galatians 3:24), and to mark out Israel as a distinct people among the nations. The word *παιδαγωγός* — *paidagōgos*, translated “guardian” refers to a child's attendant or custodian who supervised and escorted him until maturity; once the child reached maturity, that temporary role was no longer needed. With the coming of Christ and the arrival of the new covenant, the Mosaic administration has been brought to its fulfillment and conclusion.

Hebrews 8:6–13 makes this transition explicit, drawing on Jeremiah 31:31–34:

*In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear. Hebrews 8:13*

The new covenant is better, enacted on better promises (Hebrews 8:6), because it is grounded in the finished work of the great High Priest who has passed through the heavens (Hebrews 4:14) and offered once for all time, with finality, the sacrifice that the Levitical system could only foreshadow (Hebrews 10:11–14). The promise in Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:27 that God will write His law on the hearts of His people and put His Spirit within them refers not to the Mosaic code reissued internally but to the righteous character of God, for which the Mosaic law was always a pointer, now imparted to the believer through union with Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit.

We believe that Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:17, "I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them", means that He is the One to whom the Law and the Prophets were always pointing, and that He brings them to their appointed completion. Matthew's use of fulfillment language throughout his Gospel consistently means that Jesus is the goal and destination of the Old Testament's promises, patterns, and demands. The fulfillment of the law in Christ means its purpose has been realized.

2 Corinthians 3:7–11 provides Paul's own account of the relationship between the Mosaic and new covenant ministries. He describes the Mosaic ministry as a ministry of death, engraved in letters on stone, glorious but fading, being brought to an end. The new covenant ministry surpasses it with permanent, non-fading glory. This is not disrespect for the Mosaic covenant. It is the declaration that what was designed to be temporary and typological has reached its appointed end in the permanent reality of the new covenant.

## Scripture References

Romans 7:12; Genesis 15:6; Romans 3:20; Galatians 3:24; Hebrews 8:6–13; Jeremiah 31:31–34; Hebrews 8:13; Hebrews 8:6; Hebrews 4:14; Hebrews 10:11–14; Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:27; Matthew 5:17; 2 Corinthians 3:7–11.

*Thomas Schreiner, in The Law and Its Fulfillment, argues that the Mosaic covenant was temporary by design, a guardian until Christ came, and that with His coming the guardian's function has been fulfilled and the Mosaic administration has concluded as a governing covenantal structure. He contends this represents not the failure of the law but its completion in the One it always pointed toward.*

*D.A. Carson, in his Matthew commentary in the Expositor's Bible Commentary, argues that Matthew 5:17–20 does not teach that every aspect of the Mosaic law continues unchanged into the new covenant age. He contends that Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets by being the One they pointed toward, and that in His fulfillment He establishes the new covenant pattern in which the law's deepest intention is realized in Him.*

*Douglas Moo, in his Romans commentary, argues that the new covenant does not continue the Mosaic administration but supersedes it, as Hebrews makes abundantly clear. He contends that the righteousness the law demanded but could not produce is now realized in believers through the Spirit, who imparts God's righteous character through union with Christ.*

**Recommended Resources:** Thomas Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* (Baker, 1993); Douglas Moo, *Romans* (NICNT, Eerdmans, 2018); D.A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC, Zondervan, 1984); William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Baker, 1984); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (P&R, 1980); Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law* (IVP, 1994)

## Jewish and Gentile Believers in Christ, One New Man Under the New Covenant

We believe that in Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, because all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). This declaration means that every distinction of covenantal status that previously governed access to God has been removed in Christ. Jewish and Gentile believers share the same standing before God, the same righteousness, the same Spirit, the same inheritance, and the same covenant Lord. There is no two-tier covenantal structure within the body of Christ in which Jewish believers remain bound to Mosaic boundary laws while Gentile believers are free from them. Christ has fulfilled the law, abolished the dividing wall, and created one new man, so that both Jew and Gentile stand before God on the same basis: grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Ephesians 2:14–15 is the clearest statement of what Christ has accomplished:

*For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace. Ephesians 2:14–15*

The dividing wall was removed by Christ's abolition of the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. The Greek word *katargasās* means to render inoperative, to bring to an end. What has been abolished are the specific Mosaic ordinances that constituted Jewish covenantal distinctiveness and created the barrier between Jew and Gentile. The result is one new man in place of the two, not two streams of covenant obligation within one body.

Galatians 5:2–4 states the consequence for any who would take on Mosaic covenant signs in the new covenant age:

*Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. Galatians 5:2–4*

Paul says "every man" without qualification of motive or ethnic background. The warning applies to the covenantal act itself. Circumcision is the sign of entry into the Mosaic covenant, and to take on that sign in the new covenant age is to take on the Mosaic covenant's obligations as a system, a system Christ has fulfilled and concluded. We affirm that Jewish believers do not stop being ethnically Jewish when they come to faith in Christ. Ethnic identity is not erased in Christ.

We affirm that God's purposes for Israel as an ethnic people continue and will be gloriously realized in the future. What we do not affirm is that Jewish believers in the new covenant age stand under the Mosaic covenant's specific ordinances as an ongoing covenantal obligation, because both Jewish and Gentile believers now stand under the one new covenant sealed in Christ's blood.

### Scripture References

Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14–15; Galatians 5:2–4.

*Thomas Schreiner, in his Galatians commentary in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary series, argues that Galatians 5:2–4 warns every man, without exception of motive or ethnicity, against taking on circumcision in the new covenant age. He contends that Paul's concern is that accepting the Mosaic covenant's sign entangles one in a system that Christ has fulfilled and concluded, and that this warning applies to Jewish believers as much as to Gentile converts.*

*Darrell Bock, in his Ephesians commentary, argues that Ephesians 2:14–15 teaches that the specific Mosaic ordinances that created the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile have been abolished in Christ's body. He contends the result is one new man, not two streams of covenant obligation within one community, and that Paul's language of abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances is too strong to be reduced to a mere adjustment of the law's boundary-marking function.*

*F.F. Bruce, in his Galatians commentary in the New International Greek Testament Commentary series, argues that Paul's warning in Galatians 5 is directed at the covenantal act of circumcision as such, not merely at the motivation behind it, because circumcision carries with it entry into the Mosaic system that Christ has superseded. Bruce contends that to take on circumcision in the new covenant age is to signal that Christ's work is insufficient.*

**Recommended Resources:** Thomas Schreiner, Galatians (ZECNT, Zondervan, 2010); Darrell Bock, Ephesians (TNTC, IVP, 2019); F.F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians (NIGTC, Eerdmans, 1982); John MacArthur, Galatians (Moody, 1987); Ronald Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians (NICNT, Eerdmans, 1988)

## God's Faithfulness to Israel, The Irrevocable Calling

We believe that God's covenant promises to ethnic Israel are irrevocable and that He is not finished with the Jewish people. Romans 11:29 states it without qualification: "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." Paul has argued throughout Romans 9 through 11 that God has not rejected His people. Israel's present hardening is partial (11:25) and temporary. A future remains in which all Israel will be saved (11:26), in which the Deliverer will come from Zion and turn ungodliness from Jacob, in fulfillment of the covenant promise (11:26–27). Romans 11:28–29 is Paul's summary: as regards election, Israel remains beloved for the sake of their forefathers, and the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.

We believe in a future, literal, large-scale salvation of Israel, in which ethnic Jewish people come to faith in their Messiah Jesus in fulfillment of the prophetic promises. Zechariah 12:10

describes this: "I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him." This is a future event, still awaited, and it grounds the church's ongoing love for and evangelism of Jewish people.

We affirm that super-sessionism in its hard form, the view that the church has simply replaced Israel so that the promises made to ethnic Israel now belong exclusively to the church, does not do justice to the plain sense of Romans 11, the prophetic literature, or the force of Romans 11:29. God has not abandoned Israel. The present hardening is real but the promised restoration is equally real. The olive tree does not represent ethnic Israel merely according to the flesh, but the one covenant people of God rooted in the promises given to the patriarchs and fulfilled in Christ. The wild branches grafted in do not displace the natural branches; they are joined to the same tree, benefiting from the same root (Romans 11:17–18).

At the same time, we believe that the irrevocability of God's calling for Israel means that Israel's future lies in their Messiah Jesus, not alongside Him through a separate path. All Israel will be saved through faith in Christ, the Deliverer who comes from Zion. There is no second path to God for the Jewish people. Acts 4:12 leaves no ambiguity: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

### Scripture References

Romans 11:25-29; Zechariah 12:10; Romans 11:17–18; Acts 4:12.

*Thomas Schreiner, in his Romans commentary, argues that Romans 9 through 11 teaches that God has a future for ethnic Israel that has not been canceled or transferred to the church. He contends that Paul's conclusion in Romans 11:25–27 anticipates a future large-scale salvation of ethnic Israel through faith in their Messiah, and that the irrevocability of God's calling means Israel's rejection is neither total nor final.*

*John Piper, in The Justification of God, argues that Romans 9 through 11 is Paul's defense of the reliability of God's word to Israel, and that the conclusion of that defense is the assurance that a future salvation of Israel remains in God's sovereign plan. Piper contends that God's sovereignty in election, far from canceling Israel's future, guarantees it.*

*Michael Vlach, in Has the Church Replaced Israel?, argues at length that the New Testament does not teach that the church has replaced or absorbed Israel, and that Romans 11, read in its plain sense, anticipates a future national restoration of Israel in fulfillment of the Old Testament covenantal promises. Vlach places this within a broader argument that the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenant promises have specific ethnic and national dimensions that cannot be collapsed into the church without doing violence to the texts.*

*Walter Kaiser Jr., in Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament and in The Promise-Plan of God, argues that the promises made to Israel in the Abrahamic covenant are everlasting and unconditional and will be fulfilled for ethnic Israel in the future. He contends that God's covenant faithfulness is directly at stake in the literal fulfillment of His promises to Abraham's physical descendants, and that the consistent hermeneutic of the Old Testament demands reading those promises as applying to the people to whom they were given.*

**Recommended Resources:** John Piper, *The Justification of God* (Baker, 1983); Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT, Baker Academic, 1998); Walter Kaiser Jr., *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament*

(Zondervan, 1987); Michael Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (B&H Academic, 2010); Barry Horner, *Future Israel* (B&H Academic, 2007); Darrell Bock and Mitch Glaser, eds., *To the Jew First* (Kregel, 2008)

## The Grace of God, Human Guilt, and First-Century Judaism

We believe that human guilt before a holy God is a universal condition, not a problem peculiar to one ethnic group or historical moment. Romans 3:23 states it without exception: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. This universal diagnosis applies to Jew and Gentile alike, in the first century and in every century. The law reveals sin (Romans 3:20), producing the knowledge of guilt before God, and no human being, regardless of covenant heritage, religious sincerity, or moral seriousness, escapes this condemnation on the basis of their own performance. Romans 5:12 explains the root of this universal condition: “through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all mankind, because all sinned.”

We affirm that Israel in the Old Testament was never saved by law-keeping. The grace of God precedes the law at every point in the Old Testament narrative. God chose Abraham by sheer favor (Genesis 12:1–3). God rescued Israel from Egypt before giving them the law at Sinai (Exodus 20:2).

At the same time, we believe first-century Judaism was diverse, and therefore cannot be reduced to a single covenantal-nomist description in which obedience merely maintains covenant membership and never functions as a basis for standing before God. Covenantal nomism teaches that one gets into the covenant by grace, but stays in by law-keeping. Second Temple Jewish literature does, in several places, reflect the expectation that human obedience contributes to one's standing before God and that there is a genuine question of whether one has done enough. Paul's universal argument in Romans 3:19–20 that the whole world is accountable and no human being is justified by works of the law addresses a genuine human tendency that is not limited to any one historical community's formal theology. His conclusions are universal in scope, regardless of the specific contours of first-century Jewish self-understanding.

### Scripture References

Romans 3:20; Romans 3:23; Romans 5:12; Genesis 12:1–3; Exodus 20:2; Romans 3:19–20.

*Simon Gathercole, in *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5*, demonstrates through careful examination of Second Temple Jewish texts that the portrait of first-century Judaism as uniformly covenantal-nomist and non-merit-seeking is historically insufficient. He shows that patterns of boasting before God on the basis of one's obedience appear in multiple strands of Jewish literature from Paul's period, and that Paul's argument in Romans addresses this genuine human tendency.*

*D.A. Carson and his co-editors, in the two-volume *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, assemble a team of scholars to examine the full range of Second Temple Jewish literature and argue that E.P. Sanders' portrait of a uniformly grace-oriented Judaism, while containing genuine insights, is historically insufficient and cannot bear the exegetical weight placed on it. The collection demonstrates that the literature reflects significant diversity, including strands that are genuinely merit-oriented.*

*Stephen Westerholm, in *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*, provides one of the most thorough and balanced assessments of the debate between the traditional and New Perspective readings of Paul, arguing that Paul's argument in *Romans* and *Galatians* addresses the universal human tendency to seek righteousness before God through performance, and that this conclusion is not contingent on the specific soteriology of any particular group of first-century Jews.*

**Recommended Resources:** Simon Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting?* (Eerdmans, 2002); D.A. Carson, Peter O'Brien, and Mark Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vols. 1 and 2 (Baker, 2001 and 2004); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul* (Eerdmans, 2004); Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law* (IVP, 1994)

## How We Read Acts, Descriptive Narrative and Theological Principle

We believe that the book of Acts is an historical narrative that describes what happened in the early decades of the church, and that historical narrative must be read differently from the epistles and the underlying theology of Paul's letters. When Luke records what early believers did, how they worshiped, how they related to the temple, how they navigated Jewish social contexts, how Paul conducted himself in various settings, he is describing what occurred, not always prescribing what all believers in all times and places must do. This interpretive principle does not diminish Acts or reduce it to mere history. Acts is the inspired Word of God and every part of it is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. But the way narrative Scripture instructs us differs from the way Paul's careful theological argument in *Romans* or *Galatians* instructs us, and conflating the two modes produces interpretive errors in both directions.

The clearest statement of this hermeneutical principle appears in Acts 2:44–45, where the early Jerusalem believers sold possessions and held everything in common. Luke is describing the Spirit-produced generosity of a nascent community in a specific moment in redemptive history, in a city where Jewish pilgrims who had come for Pentecost were staying and needed support. He is not prescribing communal ownership as a binding model for every church in every generation. The same interpretive care applies throughout the narrative.

We believe this principle is directly relevant to how we read Paul's conduct in Acts, and specifically to how we read Acts 21, Acts 16, and the synagogue scenes throughout the book. These passages describe Paul's actual behavior in specific evangelistic and pastoral contexts. They do not prescribe those behaviors as permanent covenantal obligations for Jewish believers. Reading narrative description as covenantal prescription is an interpretive move that requires explicit textual warrant, and in the case of Paul's Jewish observance in Acts, the explicit

theological argumentation of his own letters provides the most reliable guide to what his behavior meant and what principle it embodied.

*To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 1 Corinthians 9:20–22*

This passage is Paul's own theological explanation of his missionary flexibility, and it is the hermeneutical key to reading his conduct throughout Acts. Several observations from this text are essential to a right interpretation of the Acts narrative.

First, Paul explicitly says that when he became as one under the law, he was not himself under the law. The parenthetical is not incidental. It is Paul's own qualification of what his behavior meant: he was behaving in ways consistent with Jewish practice not because he was covenantally obligated to do so but because it served the evangelistic goal of winning those who were. The behavior was real. The covenantal standing that behavior normally expressed was not. Paul was inhabiting a posture for the sake of the gospel, not expressing a continuing covenantal identity.

Second, the entire passage is organized around a single explicit purpose: that by all means I might save some. Every accommodation Paul describes, to Jews, to those under the law, to those outside the law, to the weak, is in service of this stated evangelistic aim. The principle is missiological flexibility in the service of the gospel, not covenantal identity expressed through ongoing obligation. Paul gives up his rights (1 Corinthians 9:12, 15, 18) to remove obstacles to the gospel. This is the logic of deference and love, not the logic of covenantal calling.

Third, the passage immediately follows Paul's extended argument in 1 Corinthians 8–9 about food offered to idols and the rights of the strong. The contextual logic is, just as the strong give up their rights about food for the sake of the weak, so Paul gives up his rights in all kinds of ways for the sake of the lost. The pattern is voluntary self-limitation in the service of others, which is categorically different from ongoing covenantal obligation.

We believe this is how the Acts narrative must be read when it records Paul's Jewish practice. Acts 16:1–3 records Paul circumcising Timothy because of the Jews in that region, who all knew Timothy's father was Greek. Luke states the reason explicitly: it was because of the Jews in those places, for the sake of the evangelistic mission in synagogue contexts. Timothy's circumcision is not presented as the fulfillment of a covenantal calling but as the removal of an obstacle to gospel access in a specific Jewish evangelistic context. This reading is confirmed by the immediate surrounding context; the very same journey delivers the Jerusalem Council's decree exempting Gentiles from circumcision (Acts 16:4). Paul is implementing the Jerusalem Council's verdict for Gentiles while removing an unnecessary obstacle for a coworker with Jewish heritage who would be ministering in Jewish contexts.

Titus, by contrast, was not circumcised (Galatians 2:3–5), and Paul insists he did not yield to pressure to circumcise him even for a moment, because his case was a matter of theological principle. The Judaizers were pressing for Titus's circumcision as a theological requirement, and

Paul refused. Timothy's circumcision was a matter of missionary strategy. The contrast between the two cases is itself instructive: Paul's consistent theological principle is that circumcision is not required, and his flexible pastoral practice is that it may in certain missionary contexts remove an unnecessary obstacle. The principle governs. The flexibility serves the principle rather than contradicting it.

### Scripture References

Acts 2:44–45; Acts 21; Acts 16; 1 Corinthians 9:20–22; 1 Corinthians 9:12, 15, 18; Acts 16:1–3; Acts 16:4; Galatians 2:3–5.

*Darrell Bock, in his Acts commentary in the Baker Exegetical Commentary series, argues that Paul circumcised Timothy out of sensitivity to the Jewish audiences to whom he would minister, and that this act reflects Paul's missionary flexibility described in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 rather than a theological commitment to ongoing Jewish covenantal obligation. Bock contends that Paul held a view of freedom regarding the law while being sensitive to how it worked in mixed Jewish and Gentile communities for the sake of the gospel.*

*F.F. Bruce, in his Acts commentary, argues that Paul's circumcision of Timothy is best understood as a practical concession to Jewish sensibilities in the regions where they would be working together, not as a statement about the theological status of circumcision for Jewish believers. Bruce notes the sharp contrast with the Titus case in Galatians 2, where Paul refused circumcision precisely because it was being pressed as a theological requirement, and argues that the difference between the two cases illustrates Paul's consistent principle that circumcision is theologically indifferent while being practically sensitive to context.*

*Thomas Schreiner, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 9, argues that Paul's statement that he became as one under the law though not being himself under the law is a critical qualifier that shows Paul understood his Jewish behavior in evangelistic contexts as missiological flexibility rather than covenantal identity. Schreiner contends that the whole of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 must govern how we read Paul's behavior in Acts, and that the governing principle is the voluntary self-limitation of one who is free, not the necessary expression of one who is obligated.*

**Recommended Resources:** Darrell Bock, Acts (BECNT, Baker Academic, 2007); F.F. Bruce, The Book of the Acts (NICNT, Eerdmans, 1988); Thomas Schreiner, 1 Corinthians (TNTC, IVP, 2018); Craig Keener, Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, 4 vols. (Baker Academic, 2012–2015); Gordon Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT, Eerdmans, 1987)

## Acts 21, the Nazirite Vow, and the Principle of All Things to All People

Acts 21 has been misread when it is treated as evidence that Paul lived as a Torah-observant Jew in the full covenantal sense throughout his ministry. We believe the passage, read in its own context, is one of the clearest illustrations of Paul's missionary principle from 1 Corinthians 9 "To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might gain Jews... I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some."

The context of Acts 21 is this: Paul arrives in Jerusalem, James and the elders tell him that thousands of Jewish believers are zealous for the law, and that a rumor has circulated that Paul has been teaching Jews in the Diaspora to forsake Moses, not to circumcise their children, and to abandon their customs (Acts 21:20–21). The elders propose a plan: Paul should take on the expenses of four men under a Nazirite vow, purify himself with them, and go to the temple so that everyone will know the rumor is false and that Paul himself lives in observance of the law (Acts 21:22–24).

Several things about this passage demand careful attention before concluding that it establishes ongoing Torah observance as a covenantal norm for Jewish believers.

First, the action is explicitly pastoral and reputational in its stated purpose. James does not say: Paul, you are covenantally obligated as a Jewish believer to maintain Torah practice, so do this to fulfill your calling. He says, “so that all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you” and that Paul himself also “walks orderly.” In other words, do this so that all will know the rumor about you is false. The purpose is to manage a damaging misrepresentation of Paul's teaching, not to fulfill a theological requirement. James himself signals that this is a strategic action when he immediately distinguishes the Jewish believers' situation from that of the Gentile believers, for whom the Jerusalem Council's decree stands (Acts 21:25). The two-tier framing in this very passage is about the pastoral management of a crisis, not a theological prescription of permanent differentiation.

Second, Paul's compliance is entirely consistent with 1 Corinthians 9:20–22. Paul has said he became as one under the law to win those under the law. Jewish believers zealous for the law are precisely the audience James describes, and Jewish unbelievers at the temple are precisely the audience whose stumbling James is concerned about. Paul's Nazirite vow participation is a concrete instance of becoming as one under the law for the sake of those who are under the law, removing an obstacle to his continued ministry and credibility in Jerusalem. It is not evidence that Paul understood himself to be covenantally obligated to these practices as a Jewish believer in the new covenant.

Third, the broader testimony of Paul's letters, written closer to his own theological reflection than Luke's narrative account, consistently presents the Mosaic administration as concluded in Christ for all who are in Him. Romans 7:6, Galatians 5:2–4, Galatians 3:24–25, and 2 Corinthians 3:7–11 all describe the Mosaic covenant's administrative function as brought to its end in Christ. Paul does not write as a man who understands himself to stand under two covenants simultaneously, maintaining Mosaic obligations as a covenantal calling while also living fully under the new covenant. He writes as a man who has died to the law through the body of Christ (Romans 7:4) and who is now free from the law to serve in the new way of the Spirit (Romans 7:6). When his letters and his behavior in a specific pastoral crisis appear to tension, his letters provide the explicit theological account of what his behavior meant.

Fourth, the fact that Paul's Nazirite vow in Acts 21 involved animal sacrifices at the temple raises a question that the covenantal-obligation reading must answer: did Paul believe those sacrifices were still efficacious in any sense after Christ's once-for-all-time sacrifice? The book of Hebrews answers that question directly, the Levitical sacrifices have been fulfilled and set aside (Hebrews 10:11–14) and Paul's own theology of Christ as the one sacrifice for sins (Romans 3:25, 8:3) makes any sincere repetition of temple sacrifice theologically incoherent

after the cross. The most coherent reading of Paul's participation is that he understood it as the kind of accommodation he describes in 1 Corinthians 9, inhabiting Jewish practice for the sake of the mission without treating those practices as covenantally meaningful in their own right.

We also note that Acts 28:17 records Paul saying that he had done nothing against the customs of the Jewish people. This statement is made to Jewish leaders in Rome as Paul defends himself against the charges that led to his imprisonment. It is forensic self-defense, not a theological claim about the ongoing obligation of Jewish believers to Torah. Paul is saying he has not been a lawbreaker or a troublemaker within Jewish communal life. He is not saying that Jewish believers in Christ are permanently obligated to Mosaic practice as a covenantal calling.

We believe that the consistent, convergent witness of Paul's letters, read with the Acts narrative in its proper context, produces the following conclusion: Paul was free from the Mosaic law as a covenantal obligation because he had died to it through Christ. He voluntarily engaged in Jewish practice in specific evangelistic and pastoral contexts for the sake of the gospel and the people he was trying to reach or keep from stumbling. He was, as he said of himself, all things to all people. That principle is not a covenantal obligation. It is the freedom of one who is no longer under law but under grace, using that freedom in the service of love.

*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 1 Corinthians 9:19*

### Scripture References

Acts 21; 1 Corinthians 9:20–22; Acts 21:20–21; Acts 21:22–24; Acts 21:25; Romans 7:6; Galatians 5:2–4; Galatians 3:24–25; 2 Corinthians 3:7–11; Romans 7:4; Hebrews 10:11–14; Romans 3:25; Romans 8:3; Acts 28:17; 1 Corinthians 9:19.

*Darrell Bock, in his Acts commentary, argues that Paul's participation in the Nazirite vow in Acts 21 is best understood as a pastoral accommodation designed to address the specific crisis created by the rumors about his teaching, and that it reflects the same missionary flexibility Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 9. Bock notes that the purpose James states is entirely reputational and that the passage cannot bear the weight of establishing permanent covenantal Torah obligation for Jewish believers.*

*F.F. Bruce, in his Acts commentary, argues that Paul's conduct in Acts 21 is consistent with his own statement that he became as one under the law to win those under the law, and that the passage illustrates rather than contradicts his theological position in Galatians and Romans. Bruce contends that Paul's flexibility in Jewish contexts was genuine but strategically motivated, not an expression of ongoing covenantal identity.*

*Gordon Fee, in his 1 Corinthians commentary, argues that 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 is the hermeneutical key to Paul's missionary behavior throughout Acts and that the governing principle is voluntary self-limitation in the service of the gospel. Fee contends that Paul's statement that he became as one under the law though not being himself under the law is a careful theological qualification that must govern how his Jewish conduct is interpreted, preventing the reader from concluding that his behavior in Jewish contexts expressed covenantal obligation rather than evangelistic strategy.*

**Recommended Resources:** Darrell Bock, Acts (BECNT, Baker Academic, 2007); F.F. Bruce, The Book of the Acts (NICNT, Eerdmans, 1988); Gordon Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT,

## Sanctification, Obedience, and the Role of the Holy Spirit

We believe that the obedience that flows from justification is the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, not the reciprocation of grace by human effort. The new covenant's defining promise is the gift of the Spirit, who writes the law of God on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:27) and empowers the believer to walk in God's ways. Paul's own account of how obedience is produced is pneumatological, that true Christian obedience is produced by the Holy Spirit:

*For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God has done: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Romans 8:3–4*

The righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in the believer by God, through the Spirit. The active agent is God. The believer walks by the Spirit, not in the sense of reciprocating a gift but in the sense of being led, empowered, and transformed by the One who indwells them. Romans 8:13 makes the qualifier explicit:

*For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. Romans 8:13*

The mortification of sin is "by the Spirit." This qualifier distinguishes biblical sanctification from moralism. The believer does put sin to death; the imperative is real and addressed to the whole person, but the doing is by the Spirit, meaning the Spirit is the active power through whom the believer does what they could not do in the flesh. Galatians 5:22–23 describes the Spirit's work as fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Fruit is not produced by reciprocation. It is the natural output of a living union with the vine. John 15:5 is definitive:

*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:5*

We believe that grace is not reciprocal in the sense of demanding a return gift that contributes to standing before God. Grace is the free and sovereign gift of God that produces gratitude, love, and obedience as its natural fruit through the work of the Spirit. Justification is received once, by faith, and is complete and irreversible. Sanctification is the ongoing work of the Spirit transforming the believer from the inside out. These are distinct and must not be confused.

### Scripture References

Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:27; Romans 8:3–4; Romans 8:13; Galatians 5:22–23; John 15:5.

*Thomas Schreiner, in his Romans commentary, argues that Romans 8 is Paul's most extended treatment of the Spirit's role in the believer's life, and that the obedience the law could not produce is now realized by the Spirit in those who walk by Him. He contends that the new covenant's central promise is this pneumatological fulfillment of what the law demanded, and that Christian sanctification is Spirit-wrought through union with Christ rather than self-generated by disciplined performance.*

*John Owen, in The Mortification of Sin, which is his most celebrated practical work, argues that sin is mortified by the Spirit and not by the exercise of human willpower or moral resolve alone. He contends that the believer kills sin by the Spirit, and that any attempt at mortification that does not look to the Spirit as the active agent will ultimately fail and produce either despair or self-righteousness.*

*John Piper, in When I Don't Desire God and in various treatments of Romans 8, argues consistently that sanctification is Spirit-empowered and that the Christian life is one of dependence on the Spirit's power rather than reciprocation of grace through human effort. He draws on John Owen extensively in his treatment of mortification.*

**Recommended Resources:** John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin* (Banner of Truth, reprint 2004); Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT, Baker Academic, 1998); John MacArthur, *Romans 1–8* (Moody, 1991); Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (NavPress, 1978); Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (IVP, 1996); John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God* (Crossway, 2004)

## Assurance of Salvation

We believe that the assurance of salvation rests entirely on the finished work of Jesus Christ, received through faith, and not on the quality or constancy of the believer's ongoing faithfulness. The ground of assurance is an objective verdict already rendered by God, not a subjective assessment of one's own performance. Romans 8 provides the fullest statement of this assurance in all of Scripture:

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. **Romans 8:1***

*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died, more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. **Romans 8:33–34***

*For I am sure that 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. **Romans 8:38–39***

No condemnation. No charge. No separation. These are not conditional declarations. They are the verdict and promise of God grounded in the intercession of the risen Christ at the right hand of the Father. The believer's assurance does not rest on the steadiness of their own loyalty but on the unbreakable promise of the One who died and rose for them.

We also affirm, with the whole of New Testament teaching, that genuine saving faith necessarily produces fruit over time, and that a person who lives in settled, unrepentant sin has no biblical warrant for confident assurance. This is not because obedience earns or secures salvation, but because genuine faith is never fruitless. The fruit is the evidence that the faith is real, not the

condition upon which salvation is retained. First John 2:3–6 and 1 John 3:14 make this clear: keeping the commandments and loving the brothers are evidence of knowing God and of having passed from death to life, not the means by which we ensure our standing before Him.

The pastoral consequences are significant. When an uncertain believer comes for help, the answer is to direct that person entirely outward, away from the quality of their own faithfulness and toward the objective verdict of God in Christ. Romans 8:1 grounds the believer's freedom from condemnation not in the steadiness of our allegiance, but in our union with Christ. It **does not** say, "There is now no condemnation for those whose allegiance has been sufficiently steady." It says, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The ground is in Christ, sealed by the Spirit (Ephesians 1:13–14), not maintained by the consistency of the believer's performance.

### Scripture References

Romans 8:1; Romans 8:33–34; Romans 8:38–39; 1 John 2:3–6; 1 John 3:14; Ephesians 1:13–14.

*R.C. Sproul, in Faith Alone, argues that assurance of salvation rests on Christ's finished work, and that the verdict of justification is rendered once, by God, on the basis of imputed righteousness. He contends that assurance is as stable as the righteousness on which it rests, namely Christ's own, which cannot fluctuate with the believer's performance.*

*John Piper, in Future Grace, argues that the ground of the believer's assurance is not the quality of their faith but the object of their faith, namely Christ Himself. He contends that Christ remains faithful even when our faith feels fragile, and that assurance is therefore grounded in Him rather than in the believer's track record of faithfulness.*

*Joel Beeke, in The Quest for Full Assurance, provides a comprehensive historical and biblical treatment of how assurance has been understood in the Reformed tradition, arguing that the primary ground of assurance is the objective work of Christ received through faith, and that the evidences of grace in the believer's life function as secondary confirmations of what is already objectively true in Christ.*

**Recommended Resources:** R.C. Sproul, Faith Alone (Baker, 1995); John Piper, Future Grace (Multnomah, 1995); Joel Beeke, The Quest for Full Assurance (Banner of Truth, 1999); Thomas Schreiner, Romans (BECNT, Baker Academic, 1998); John Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied (Eerdmans, 1955)

## Conclusion: The Gospel We Preach

We believe the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. It is the announcement that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, lived the life of perfect obedience every human being failed to live, died the atoning death every human being deserved to die, and rose from the dead as the vindication of His work and the firstfruits of those who belong to Him. On the basis of His finished work, God declares guilty sinners righteous, not because of anything they have done or will do, but solely because of what Christ has done for them, received

through faith alone. This is the gospel we have received, the gospel we preach, and the gospel on which this assembly stands.

*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*  
**Romans 3:21–25**

This is the center. Righteousness given, not earned. Justification as a gift, not a reward. Propitiation by blood, received by faith. Guilty and condemned sinners who are in Christ are not merely acquitted; they are declared righteous. Every believer, Jew and Gentile together, in Christ, stands already in that righteousness, not on the basis of their faithfulness, but on the basis of His faithfulness.

*In Christ,*

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