

BIBLE STUDIES ON ROMANS 9–15

Living Life Fully

David Penman

The Call for Sacrifice: Living Life to Its Fullest (Romans 12:1–2)

The epistle to the Romans does not end at chapter 11, with its ringing “To him [God] be the glory” (v. 35). It takes a crucial new direction—“Therefore, I urge you, . . .”—and issues a call for us to live lives worthy of the one who has called and commissioned us.

As C. K. Barrett wrote:

[We have] read of the universal sinfulness of mankind and the universal grace of God, of his infinite love in sending his Son to die for our sins, and of the free justification by faith alone which, in his mercy, he offers. We have read of the power of the Spirit of God to bring life out of death; of predestination, and God’s eternal purpose for his creation.

There are five chapters remaining in the book of Romans, and a lifetime of faith and hope to be anticipated and applied. In Romans 12:1–2, we find the Pauline application of the principle “faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:26). There is a denial of any division between doctrine and everyday Christian living. In other words, the apostle sees no final distinction between the doctrines of creation, redemption, and sanctification, and the holiness of living that leads to social, economic, and political transformation.

There is vast richness in the teachings of Romans 12 and 13: membership in the body of Christ (12:3–5); differing gifts (12:6–8); the Christian’s graces (12:9–13); behavior towards others (12:14–21); and Christian citizenship (13:1–7). But I would like to focus on the theme of the opening verses of chapter 12: the call to sacrifice—or living life to the full.

God has shown us his mercy. This has been made clear in the previous eleven chapters, leading up to the great exultant cry of adoration: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! . . . To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (11:33–36). In response, we are to live as those who have seen with our own eyes, and touched with our hands, the wonders of Jesus, whom we worship. In the Lausanne movement and in the fellowship we represent, we need to rediscover, not only a human and practical application of the doctrines and beliefs imparted to us, but a sense of awe and wonder as we seek to do “his good, pleasing and perfect will” (12:2).

Let’s explore briefly the context of these two practical chapters, as we seek to apply the strong theological teaching of the first eleven chapters of the epistle. There are five areas to consider: membership in a body, differing gifts, Christian graces, loving relationships, and Christian citizenship.

1. *Membership in the body of Christ* (12:3–5). These verses remind us of the mutuality in our relationships within the Christian family. We *need* each other and need to depend on each other.

We used to be a family of six. I have three married children and a nineteen-year-old still at home. One of my daughters brought her boyfriend home often, finally married him, and then they both moved in! They now have a little boy, Hamish, who is fifteen months old. Two of our children have married and moved to their new homes. Today, we are still a family of six with Chris, Hugh, and baby Hamish showing no signs of leaving! Within Aussie culture, this is very unusual and is normally discouraged. Quite frankly, for us it is a joy! We love having them, and we complement and enrich each other’s lives. It offers us a glimpse of the mutuality in the family of Jesus, where we are also to complement and enrich one another.

The metaphor of the body in verse 4 is developed in 1 Corinthians 12, and it appears again in Ephesians 4:16 and Colossians 1:18. The body is healthy when all its parts cooperate, each in its proper sphere. The less visible parts, as medical science demonstrates, are as vital for full health, indeed to life, as the more visible ones. Microscopic malfunctioning can produce tragic diseases. So too with the people of God.

There are numerous illustrations throughout Christian history of those whose resources seemed small, but who became wonderfully significant. For example, the widow of Zarephath, the child with loaves and fish, Simon of Cyrene, and the woman at the treasury. None of these people realized at the time how important they were to those around them.

2. *Differing gifts* (12:6–8). In verses 6–8, Paul refers to three kinds of gifts. They are important because they sum up the qualities and gifts which the church needs:

- There are gifts expressed through speech: prophecy, teaching, and exhorting. The church lives by the Word of God, and these gifts (which together we might call preaching) are essential to its life.
- There are gifts expressed in practical service: serving, contributing, and showing mercy. A church that does not back up its spoken witness with an active witness of love is not the church of Christ.
- There is the gift of leadership or, as some translations indicate, presiding. We need Christians who are able to guide the community as a whole, and take some responsibility for the welfare of others.

We expect to see all these gifts exercised in some real measure by ministers of the gospel, but Paul thinks of them as distributed, and exercised, throughout the community.

3. *The Christian’s graces* (12:9–13). The passage is dynamic and the action implied is unmistakable. These imperatives imply love, devotion, honor, service, joy, hope, patience, faithfulness, and hospitality. There is a high level of expectation. Who can possibly reflect all these things?

I have no doubt that Paul is describing the “normal” Christian life: the life

that we are to anticipate, the life we are to offer to others, and the life of Jesus, in ours, today.

4. *Behavior towards others* (12:14–21). The remainder of the chapter underlines the importance of mutual love (vv. 9–10, 13, 15) and of love even for enemies (vv. 14, 17, 19–21). This is how living sacrifices are to be offered and how our concern for our neighbors is shown.
5. *Christian citizenship* (13:1–7). It is important to keep Christian society in the first century in proper perspective. The Roman Empire—stretching from the Rhine, the Danube, and the Black Sea, bounded to the west by the Atlantic, and to the south and east by the great deserts—had given the Mediterranean world a stable peace. The “Roman peace” was the social and political framework within which the Christian church attained its initial international form. It was also a framework in which relative harmony and peace prevailed throughout the region. The Empire had not yet branded the church as a dissident rebellious group. When Paul was writing, there was still hope of partnership. Chapter 13:1–7 needs to be understood within this context.

It creates real difficulties if we apply them out of their context into the structures of an unequal and unjust society. The temptation to illustrate this issue from a dozen examples of local and national inhumanity is great, but this is not the place or the time to do so.

How can we summarize this call to be living sacrifices? It is expressed clearly in the introduction to the two chapters:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (12:1–2).

What does this mean? This is an important verse with two main points: God has shown us his mercy, and we are to live the Christian life to its fullest.

1. *God has shown us his mercy*. What is this mercy? How shall we see it? Can we experience it today?

A few months ago, my wife and I stood within the ancient walls of Jerusalem on the site believed to be the place of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. Many arguments exist as to which of several competing locations are genuine, and these discussions will continue for a long time. But one thing is sure, and all the records agree, that Jesus of Nazareth, a carpenter’s son who claimed to be the expected Messiah, died in Jerusalem in dramatic circumstances on a Roman cross.

Today, it is often said that history, archaeology, and theology are unimportant, and that what matters is our living and our relationships. This approach is not Christian, and in the end, it is harmful. Many faiths and philosophical systems can offer a similar way to live, but Christianity is rooted in history, and in the gospel—in the Good News. The New Testament constantly affirms this. Otherwise, why bother with Jerusalem, with the Cross, or with the agony of such a terrible death?

For the Christian, the gospel is the fact of Christ crucified—his finished work on the cross. The gospel is not good news of a baby in a manger, a young man at a carpenter’s bench, a preacher in the fields of Galilee, or even of an empty tomb. The gospel is that God cared so much about us that he was willing to die on the cross, so we might be set free and be offered a new possibility in life. No other religious system functions like this. “When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).

This is the unique nature of our faith. This is the essence of our faith. This is the gospel. *This is the mercy of God.*

2. *We are to live the Christian life to its fullest*. In view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1). What does this mean? How do we put into practice this gospel life—that which pleases God?

Let me illustrate by telling you what it is not. John Wesley was the son of a clergyman and was a clergyman himself. He was orthodox in belief, religious in practice, upright in conduct, and full of good works. He and his friends visited the inmates of the prisons and workhouses of Oxford. They took pity on the slum children of the city and provided them with food, clothing, and education. They observed Saturday as the Sabbath as well as Sunday. They went to church and to Holy Communion. They gave alms, searched the Scriptures, fasted, and prayed. But they were bound in the limits of their own religion, instead of putting their trust in Jesus as their Lord and Master. A few years later, John Wesley (in his own words) came to “trust in Christ, in Christ only for salvation” and was given an inward assurance that his sins had been taken away. This faith principle, this Jesus-orientation, authenticates works of mercy and a life of service.

During the course of my regular visits to the Middle East, I have met two quite different people who illustrate this truth.

Hassan Dehquani Tafti is the exiled bishop in Iran. He was chairman of a clergy conference I attended in Cyprus several years ago, and has been a part of my life over many years. Before his conversion to Christianity in Iran, he was a devout and devoted Muslim. Eventually, he was ordained and became the first Anglican bishop in that ancient land. During the 1980 uprising, the church was attacked and the bishop’s life was threatened. Tragically, the mobs turned on his family and his only son, Bahram, was brutally murdered. The bishop escaped to England, but rather than becoming bitter, he shines as an example of love and forgiveness toward his enemies.

His Holiness, Pope Shenouda III, of Egypt, is leader of the ancient Coptic Orthodox Church and was, during the first few years of the 1980s, confined to his desert monastery in one of the last acts of religious repression by President Anwar Sadat before his assassination.

Until his imprisonment, Pope Shenouda was tremendously effective in the leadership of his six million followers. His weekly Bible studies drew more than six thousand people. Many lives were changed and Shenouda became a target of the conservative Muslim brotherhood. In 1981, they confined him to the monastery.

In 1984, after months of effort, my wife and I were allowed to make the long journey

through the desert, past numerous military check-points, to his monastic home. I was one of few overseas church visitors allowed to see him during those years, and my wife certainly was the first woman! We had a marvelous day with that great man and his companions. Their faith was transparent, and even their limited opportunities for service were used to the fullest and rooted in their faith in Jesus. As we prepared to leave later that day, I asked the patriarch if he had a message for the Coptic community in Melbourne. He became quiet and reflected carefully before saying:

Tell them that God is so good to me. I am well, and they should not worry about me. Remember God is in control, and not this government.

But there is a final story to share. Some years ago, while I was an assistant bishop in Melbourne, I went to St. Aldan's Anglican church in one of our suburbs to announce the decision of their minister to retire due to the rapid advance of cancer. Arthur's honesty and simple trust in Jesus deeply affected many lives. In his last letter to the parish before he died, he wrote:

Our ways are not God's ways! At times this is very difficult to believe—I freely acknowledge that! But I want to affirm something that I feel deep down in my inner being, that out of every situation God brings good.

This is what it means to live the Christian life to the fullest. The common factor in these lives is not the individual, the life lived, or the interpretation given to varying circumstances. The common factor is: Jesus, who is the Good News of God; Jesus, who infuses our ideas with his purposes; Jesus, who authenticates our behavior and lifestyle; and Jesus, in the words with which we began, who is in himself God's mercy, and who leads us to sacrificial living and shows us how to live life to its fullest.

BIBLE STUDIES ON ROMANS 9–15

Love in the End Times

David Penman

The Unifying Power of Love (Romans 13:14)

Over the past few days we have considered God's plan for the Jewish people and the nations, illustrated by a study of the theme of the great missionary passage in Romans 10:14–17: How, and through whom, can they hear the message?

May I say, in passing, to my Jewish friends who are in Christ, and who are such an important part of this Congress, that many of us believe you bring special gifts and insights. We need to hear what you have to say, and we need to accept you in Christ as you are. We love you dearly as brothers and sisters in the Lord, and want to learn from the precious insights you bring to this family. I fear that sometimes we fail to care for you as we ought, and fail to learn from you all we can.

We examined the life and witness of all Christians. We considered that marvelous message in Romans 12–13, with its focus on Christian faith in practice. And we concluded with an exposition of Romans 12:1–2, in which we were exhorted by the apostle to be living sacrifices—living life to the fullest.

I have experienced some difficulty in doing justice to the extensive passages before us each day. I have tried to spend half of the time on general textual comments and the remainder on special focus.

As our Congress draws to a close, in our reading there is a growing emphasis on the approaching end (i.e., the end of all time) and an emphasis on the urgency of love. We will concentrate on the theme: The unifying power of love (Romans 13:8–14).

In Romans 13:12–14 we are reminded that the night is far spent and the day is at hand. The apostle explores the special reasons for ending our old way of life and embarking on a new life in Christ. For this Congress, this chapter is a fresh reminder of the urgency of the times, and of the sacrificial service that is required as the “night is nearly over; the day is almost here” (v. 12). I have no doubt whatsoever of the literal meaning of the passage, nor of its imperative for us as we conclude our considerations in this Congress of World Evangelization.

In terms of earthly time, Paul's new day was not as near as many had thought, but the emphasis is exact. We live in the last chapter of the world's history, however long that chapter may turn out to be. We must live with God's future in mind. It is no wonder verses 13–14 became the “womb” from which Augustine was born in A.D. 386 and became the inspiration of Wesley's comment, “Herein is contained the whole of our salvation.”

Let's return to verse 8. In the RSV, this verse is translated, “Owe no one anything,” but the New International Version makes it clear that Paul is not forbidding borrowing,