Alright, let’s go ahead and get going. Today I want to move from the book of Acts and begin, for the next few weeks at least, to look at Paul’s letters. As we said, in a sense, Acts provides a transition or an introduction to the rest of the New Testament in that the major characters and figures that play a significant role in Acts end up being the authors of the letters – especially Paul, who was one of the dominant figures in Acts. It is natural, then, to find a collection of his letters immediately after Acts and dominating much of the rest of the New Testament. So, today we’ll begin to look at those letters starting, again Romans. We’ll follow them in canonical order, not necessarily the order in which they were written, but we’ll follow the order in which they occur in the New Testament. So, we’ll start with Romans.

Let’s open with prayer. Father, I thank you, again, for so graciously disclosing yourself in the form of the Old and New Testaments and that we have the privilege of thinking about and analyzing and reading that very revelation. I pray that we will not take it for granted – the gracious gift of the revelation of yourself in your Word and that we would bring all our mental energies to it and all the tools at our disposal to try to understand it as fully and accurately as possible. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

This is a picture of Paul after taking a New Testament exam, with his hand on his head. As I said, the letters of Paul are not arranged chronologically but generally are arranged in their order of length. So, the reason Romans comes first is not because it was written first but because it was the longest letter that Paul wrote. The first letter that Paul wrote would either go to Galatians or First Thessalonians. My preference would be for First Thessalonians, and I’ll tell you later in the semester why that’s the case. Before we
look at Paul’s letters in specific, just a brief introduction to Paul’s letters themselves and Paul as a person that might help us to understand a little bit more about his letter writing. But, first of all, when we think of Paul’s letters, it’s important to grasp what New Testament scholars call “the occasional nature” of Paul’s letters. By “occasional,” that doesn’t mean he wrote them on occasion: the “occasional nature” of his letters meant, Paul’s letters emerge as responses to rather specific situations and problems.

So again, going back to the book of Acts, when we read of all the places Paul visited and all the churches he established, it was in response to certain problems and situations that arose in those churches that Paul sat down and wrote these letters. So, we don’t have a complete theology of everything Paul thought; we don’t have a theological textbook that reflects Paul’s thinking on any given issue. Instead, we have a series of very contextually specific letters addressing very specific circumstances and problems that are the only window into Paul’s thinking and his theology. So, what that means is, we need to be aware of the “occasional nature” of his letters. We need to be aware of the circumstances and situations and problems that gave rise to them.

Now, there have been two common analogies that are not original with me, but you find them referred to in a number of treatments of Paul’s letters or Paul’s thought. There’s a couple of analogies that perhaps help us to understand and explain how it is we have to approach Paul’s letters--what it’s like to read them. The two analogies are a phone conversation and reading the mail – getting in someone’s mailbox and reading someone else’s mail or reading a letter that was not intended for you.

So, the first one, reading Paul’s letters are like hearing one end of the phone conversation or listening to one end of the phone conversation in that when you hear someone else talk on the phone, sometimes – I often do this with my wife or sometimes my daughter when they’re talking on phone – just by listening to what they say and how they say it, you kind of try to figure out who they’re talking to, and you try to figure out what they might be talking about just by listening to one end of the conversation. You can’t hear what’s going on in the other side, you try to reconstruct what’s going on in the other
end of the line because that’s the only way you can make sense of what you actually hear. Paul’s letters are similar to that. By reading Paul’s letters, you are listening to one end of the phone conversation: you only hear what Paul is saying – you don’t know what’s going on in the other end of the line, so you have to try to – based on reading the letters themselves – you have to try to deduce and reconstruct what most likely Paul was responding to, who was he writing to, what was the situation that he may have been addressing.

The other one is reading someone else’s mail. Again, if you received a letter that was not intended for you and you read it, there’s a good chance you may not understand large parts of it because you’re not privy to the rest of the conversation or who the other party was that wrote it, or what the situation was, or relationship between the two, or the problem that may have caused this letter to be written. So you only have the letter itself. The same is true with the reading of Paul’s letters: we only have his letters, a record of his side of the communication. So, based on that, we try to reconstruct as much as possible what most likely was going on in the church in Rome or the church in Galatia or the church in Ephesus or Colossae or any of the other cities that Paul wrote to. What was the circumstance, situation, problem or issue that gave rise to Paul writing this letter? So, in response we must reconstruct a plausible scenario from Paul’s letters that help us to interpret his letters. So, in a sense, it’s kind of a circle: we look at Paul’s letters to try to figure out what we can know about the readers, their circumstances and the problems, and then we use that to interpret the letter itself. But, again, the letters must be understood in some sense as responses to very specific situations.

Hopefully I’ll be able to demonstrate that there are several sections of Paul’s letters that don’t make sense unless we understand something about what it was Paul was addressing, and I think there are several sections of Paul’s letters that make more sense when we do. There is a big difference in the way we read a text. Maybe we’ll end up – there’s some sections I’m going to demonstrate that we should read very differently from what we’ve been led to believe by understanding what situation was and the problem that
Paul’s addressing. That can often make a difference in how we interpret the letters.

There are hints in some letters that maybe Paul does not necessarily assume that everyone will be privy to a specific situation. For example, in a couple, especially the letter to the Colossians, at the very end of it, he actually tells them to send his letter on to someone else, to the city of Laodicea. So, in some of Paul’s letters, there is a hint that it was to be read by more than just the immediate audience for which it was intended.

There are other letters that seem to be much more context specific. For example, First Corinthians: Paul addresses a number of issues, and it does seem a little more important to reconstruct what might be the nature of the situation. But there are other letters where Paul did seem to intend that this wouldn’t just be read by a specific church, but it was to be circulated, read more broadly. Interestingly, already, by the end of the first century, apparently – remember we looked at a text from Second Peter back when we were talking about Canon, where the author of Second Peter refers to a collection of Paul’s letters. So at least by the end of the first century, there was already a collection of Paul’s letters circulating fairly widely. We’re not sure how many. The specific circumstances to which these letters were addressed needs to be balanced by the fact that there appear to be some instances, like the book of Colossians, where he intended his letter to circulate more widely than just to this church in Colossae.

To then become a little more specific, and very, very briefly, talk a little bit about the person Paul himself. Who is this figure or character in early Christianity and what leads to the inclusion of all these letters bearing his name in the New Testament? First of all, the first thing to remember is Paul is actually a citizen of two separate worlds, quite literally. First of all, and in many respects, the most important background for understanding Paul was his Jewish world. Paul was raised as a devout Jew, a Pharisee. Although he apparently belonged to a Pharisaic school that was a little bit more liberal at times, Paul ended up acting very radical and right wing in the way he lived out his Judaism. That can be seen by the fact that Paul himself refers in his own letters to the fact that he attempted to destroy the Church, so concerned was he with this newfangled religion that
we call Christianity. He saw it as such a threat to Judaism and obedience to the law that he was going to do anything to stamp it out. So, Paul was of the Zealot type, a Pharisee but with zealot tendencies. If you remember when we talked about the Pharisees and the Zealots, Paul was a Pharisee with strong Zealot tendencies. Out of zeal for the law, he would even exterminate Christians because he saw this new faith in Christ as a threat to his ancestral religion. So, Paul was thoroughly a Jew with all the Jewish training, and, obviously, that’s reflected in the extent to which he borrows from the Old Testament in his writings.

But at the same time, Paul was also a citizen of Rome, and what that meant is Paul would obviously be familiar, perhaps, with Greco-Roman training and upbringing. Paul wrote in the common language of the day—the Greek language. But at the same time, Paul would often use his citizenship: he was quite willing to exploit it. Not a couple times, his Roman citizenship got him out of some serious problems when you read the book of Acts. So, Paul was a person of two worlds, clearly brought up in the world of Judaism and strict adherence to the law of the Pharisees of the Zealot type but at the same time also was a Roman citizen and a child of the Roman world as well.

Now, this all continued until the event that we read about in Acts chapter 9, and that is Paul’s conversion. In addition to Acts chapter 9, Paul himself refers to his conversion very clearly in one other place and, actually, we could probably say two other places, but the other one is Acts chapter 1. What I want to discuss briefly is that the traditional view of Paul’s conversion goes something like this: Paul was raised as a Pharisee and raised to, meticulously obey and keep the law, but the more he tried to keep the law, the more frustrated he became with that. So the more guilty he felt with his failure to obey the law and the more troubled he became in his conscience finally he simply gave in, and perhaps God’s Spirit was working in his life and prompting him. He finally gave in, and he recognized that he just couldn’t do it on his own and couldn’t keep the law. That drove him to rely on Jesus Christ, and that drove him to faith in Jesus Christ, as opposed to his own ability to keep the law because, remember, again, the more he tried to keep it, the more
frustrated he became and the more disillusioned he became with the law and his ability to keep it, the more guilty he felt – he was conscience of his failure. That finally drove him and pushed him to simply throw himself on Jesus Christ and accept God’s salvation that he’s provided through Christ.

Now, although that’s been a very popular conception, I’m not sure that’s an accurate one when you actually read the New Testament. For example, let me read two of Paul’s own descriptions of his life in Judaism. Again, remember, the traditional view is Paul was becoming less and less satisfied and feeling more guilty and frustrated because he couldn’t obey the law, and finally – in other words, he’s being set up and pushed and prepared for accepting Jesus Christ as his Savior.

But listen to these two accounts: we find one of them in Galatians chapter 1, the other’s in Philippians 3 – kind of autobiographical accounts of Paul’s life as a Jew. Here’s what he says in chapter 1 of Galatians, he says, “You have heard no doubt of my earlier life in Judaism.” So, Paul is actually writing as a Christian now, but he’s referring to his life as a Jew prior to that. He said, “You heard no doubt of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church.” Again, there’s his zealot tendencies, “I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.” But then he goes on and says, “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.” So that’s account number one.

Philippians chapter 3: there’s another account where Paul describes in autobiographical fashion his previous life. Again, he’s writing as a Christian but describing his previous life in Judaism. He says, “For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the spirit of God and boast in Jesus Christ and have no confidence in the flesh impulses, even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: I was circumcised on the eighth day, I was a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews;
as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, I was blameless.”

Now I ask you, does that sound like someone who was frustrated with his ability to keep the law or someone who had a guilty conscience or what some have called an introspective conscience, who was becoming more and more frustrated and more and more aware of his inability and his failure to keep the law, so that he’s being prepared, in a sense, for the gospel? Doesn’t sound like that to me; sounds like Paul was completely confident in his ability as a Pharisee. When it came to righteousness, he says, “I was blameless.” In Galatians, it says he advanced far beyond his contemporaries in his ability to keep the law. So confident was he in his Judaism that he would even attempt to destroy the church. So this was not somebody who was being prepared to accept the gospel. This was not someone who was confronted with their failure and guilty conscience because they thought they were unable to keep the law, and he finally threw himself at the gospel.

Instead, this is someone who is completely confident in his life in Judaism, and the only thing that changed Paul is when Jesus Christ broke into his existence and knocked him down that day on the road to Damascus. Otherwise, that was the last thing from his mind; he was not being prepared or becoming less satisfied by Judaism. He was completely confident in his religion, but it wasn’t until Jesus Christ revealed himself, according to Galatians 2, and broke into his life. Then Paul evaluates his former life in Judaism as falling short, but until Christ came along, Paul was completely satisfied with his ability to keep the law and with his life in Judaism.

So, what happened to Paul, then, on the Damascus Road? Most likely what happened on the road to Damascus, the event recorded in Acts 9 that Paul refers to in Galatians, was that this was both a conversion and a commissioning or calling of Paul. So on the one hand, notice the rest of Galatians: the section that I read is, after describing his life in Judaism, he says, “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.” So there’s the elements of both his conversion, so he is converted
from one religious system that leaves out Jesus the Messiah to one where Jesus is at the center. That’s his conversion. Yet at the same time, it’s a commissioning: he is commissioned to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, and that’s why, in the book of Acts, all those missionary journeys on that map that end up with Paul in Rome, Paul is simply fulfilling his commission from Jesus Christ – his conversion to Christianity/commission to preach the gospel not to Jews but to Gentiles.

So having said that, the first letter that we want to look at – and what I’m going to do is I’m going to pick up on the mail analogy, and the way I’ll introduce the letters is “Let’s open a piece of mail from the early church.” So, the first piece of mail of the early church that we want open is the letter addressed to the Romans. Unlike the Gospels that don’t have any indication of the readers or the author, Paul’s letters, as was typical of the first-century letter, include usually both a clear indication of the author or authors and also an indication of the readers. So, we can understand quite a bit about the author, and readers just from reading these letters. The letter to the church in Rome – that’s the first letter we’ll open.

The starting point is to recognize that we’re not the first ones who have read Romans; if you have ever read Romans and tried to understand it, more than any other book, your reading of Romans has been influenced by other people who have read it before you. Romans has played a significant role at very crucial periods in history. Anyone know who that is? Martin Luther – he’s German. Martin Luther – and you may know him as the author of such hymns as “A mighty fortress is our God” – the book of Romans played a significant role in his life. The book of Romans was a catalyst in a sense for sparking the Reformation, and it was in the book of Romans that shaped Luther thinking about salvation by grace through faith and not by good works. His thinking on that was formed by Romans, and his thinking began to take root. So, the book of Romans played a key role. In a sense, Luther’s conversion and his rethinking of what the gospel was, what it meant to be justified and saved by grace through faith and not by works sparked the well-known Reformation.
There are a number of other persons for whom Romans has played a key role. Here’s another one: that’s what you look like after studying theology for about 50 years. Does anyone know who this is? Karl Barth – very good. Karl Barth, a famous Swiss theologian, who, in my opinion, is one of the most brilliant thinkers in Christianity and one of the most brilliant theological thinkers. The book of Romans also played a key role in Karl Barth’s own reformation in Germany, where he reacted against the German liberalism of the day and found in the book of Romans, in a sense, a renewed interest in the gospel and, almost sparking his own reformation. So, these are two very key figures in the history of Christianity, brilliant minds whose minds, thinking and theological systems and subsequent Reformation-type movements were influenced, to some extent, by their reading of the book of Romans, where they were confronted again with God’s revelation to them and God’s grace. So, these are two – and there’s others – these are two of the individuals, that we stand on their shoulders as we read the book of Romans. And we’ll demonstrate how that is.

Now, who’s the author of the book of Romans? Well that’s rather obvious: it’s the first letter in the collection of Paul’s letters, and, in fact, in the very first verse of Romans, Paul names himself as the author. But there’s something interesting in the very back of the letter in chapter 16. Chapter 16, like many of Paul’s letters, he ends his letters by a greeting -- they greet certain persons. Here’s chapter 16, verse 22: “I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.” Now, I thought Paul wrote this letter. Most likely this is simply a reflection of a very common way of writing letters in the first century. That is, it was very popular and common to employ the services of what was called an “amanuensis,” basically, a secretary, who you would dictate your letter to them, and they would write your letter down. Often it appears, then, that the author of the letter himself would sometimes sign the letter in his own handwriting at the very end of the letter, and there is debate – after writing it, would Paul then read it and say, “Yes, this is fine – go ahead and send it off”? But clearly, even in Romans, we find reflected the very common first century method of producing letters: that is, to employ the services of a secretary or amanuensis, and that
appears to be what Paul’s doing. So, Tertius was his secretary who actually penned the
Book of Romans, probably as Paul dictated or said what he wanted to be written in the
letter. And I would guess that almost all of his letters probably were written and produced
that way; that’s just the way you wrote in the first century.

Why did Paul write the letter of Romans? Romans has been rather difficult at
times to figure out because Romans seems to, at times, not reflect a specific problem or
crisis. In fact, some have concluded that Romans is basically a summary of Paul’s gospel,
and there’s a lot of truth to that. But many have held back from seeing Paul responding to
a very specific crisis or problem, like he does in some of his other letters. But when
reading Romans there appears to at least be three reasons that emerge out of the letter itself
why Paul would write this, besides giving the Gordon College New Testament survey class
something to talk about.

The first one is mission, a missional purpose: that is, Paul seems to write because he
wants to secure Rome as a basis for further missionary activity. That is, you get a sense in
Romans that Paul’s ultimate plan is to move west, as far west as he can, in preaching the
gospel, and he wants to use Rome or secure Rome as a basis for his missionary activity.
So, he’s probably writing this letter, in some respects, to gain their support. For example,
this is what we read towards the end of the letter, and this is where this becomes clear, he
says, “This is the reason that I have often been hindered from coming to you” – the Roman
church. I’m reading from chapter 15 of Romans: “But now, with no further place for me
in these regions, I desire as I have for many years to come to you when I go to Spain.” So,
Paul’s ultimate goal is to get to Spain. “For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be
sent on by you once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. At present, however,
I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia have been
pleased to share the resources with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were
pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in
their spiritual blessings, they ought to be of service to them in their material ones. So
when I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will set
out by way of you to Spain. And I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.” So, do you get the picture? Paul hopes to visit Spain, and he seems to want the Roman church to rally around him and support him in doing this. So, part of the reason for writing Romans is a missional one: to get the Roman’s support and to secure it as a base for his activity, which he hopes will carry him all the way to Spain.

Another purpose is apologetic. A fund-raising letter. He doesn’t quite use the language that strongly, but you’re right, it may include, obviously, physical support. When we get to the book of Philippians, we’ll see that one of the reasons he writes Philippians is both to thank them for but also encourage their continuing financial support. And so, it’s possible that what he’s asking for is not only their prayer support or whatever but he is asking for their financial support as he sets out for Spain. Yeah, I don’t think it’s random at all. I think that’s probably intentional that he mentions these other places that have supported him.

Apologetic. Another purpose that some have discerned in Romans is an apologetic purpose. By apologetic I don’t mean that Paul is sorry for what he preaches or teaches. By apologetic, we mean explaining and defending what it is he preaches and what it is he thinks. This may go with the first one: in order to gain their support, Paul then outlines what it is he teaches or preaches. That’s possible, but clearly, as we said, a lot of people have seen in Romans one of the most detailed explanations of the gospel that Paul preaches, and so, that does seem to be one of the reasons is an apologetic one – to describe, explain and defend the gospel that he will proclaim and that he does preach.

A third one, and maybe the most important one, is a pastoral purpose, that is, especially when you get to chapter 14 in Romans, Paul seems to be very interested in or very concerned with Jew-Gentile relationship, which we have seen as an important issue in the book of Acts, climaxing in the Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter 15. Remember that. But Acts chapter 15 Jerusalem Council: the debate was on what basis the Gentiles become God’s people. This issue surfaces in Romans chapter 14, so apparently there was
probably an issue or problem in the relationship between Jew and Gentile on this very issue. On what basis did Jew and Gentiles relate to each other, and what basis will Gentiles be accepted as the people of God, along with Jews? And so, part of Romans was a pastoral purpose, that is, it was addressing a problem in the congregation, of disunity among Jew and Gentile.

Now, what could have engendered this is— one thing we do know, if the book of Romans was written probably around 57 A.D. or something like that—don’t worry, I won’t ask you that on an exam— but, assuming, if it were written around 57 A.D. about eight years earlier in 49 A.D., Claudius, was the Emperor of Rome at that time. The very last sheet in your notes I have a list of all the Emperors starting with the very first one that runs a little bit into the second century. Claudius, who was the Emperor in 49 A.D., issued an edict, and there’s various suggestions why, but he issued an edict that Jews had to be expelled from the city of Rome. So, all Jews were expelled. When Claudius died in 54 A.D., that edict was rescinded, and Jews were allowed to return to Rome. What may have happened then, is, during that period of roughly five years, the church would have continued to grow and would’ve continued to become a largely Gentile phenomena. Now with Jews coming back and finding the church has grown more and more increasingly Gentile, that may account for some of these problems that Paul must now address as he writes the book of Romans. Again in my mind, this may be one of the crucial purposes of the book of Romans, and it might explain why he spends so much time defending his gospel to demonstrate that the Jew and Gentile are both equally God’s true people.

So, be able to recognize those three; again, there may be another couple other purposes, but I think all three of these purposes emerge from the book of Romans. There’s no reason why Paul has to have only one purpose. Think about it: sometimes, when you write letters, you don’t always have just one reason you’re writing. You might sit down to write a number of things that—perhaps Paul was trying to do more than just one thing. And so, at least these three seem to describe why Paul sat down and wrote the Book of Romans. Alright, any questions so far? We want an understanding of why Romans
The next thing I want to talk about is, more broadly, kind of how we interpret Romans as a whole, but what I’m going to say also influences other books of Paul, especially Galatians. But Paul makes it clear numerous times in Romans, and I’ve given you key verses – he makes statements such as, “we are justified or saved by faith and not by works of the law.” And so, I’ve given you two of the crucial passages in Chapter 3. In 3:21 and 22, he says, “Apart of the law,” – and by “the law”, he’s referring not to just any law or Roman law; I take it he’s referring to the Law of Moses in the Old Testament. “Apart from the law,” – apart from the Law of Moses – “the righteousness of God has been revealed, a righteousness of God through faith in Christ.” So, notice how he contrasts righteousness. He seems to be saying there’s a righteousness of God that comes not through keeping the law, the Law of Moses, but now a righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. So, notice what he says in chapter 3:28, a few verses later: “For a person is justified by faith in Christ apart from works of the law.” And the question is what did Paul mean by that statement? What did he mean that righteousness comes only by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, and why was Paul convinced that you could not be righteous by the law but only by faith in Christ? Why was Paul so certain that keeping the law could not bring about salvation, that only Jesus Christ could? How do we explain this contrast between being justified or made righteous by faith in Christ and not by works of the law? How you answer that question – again, to go back to our very beginning of talking about Romans – how you answer that question depends more than anything on how you’ve been raised and taught to read the book of Romans.

One of the first persons to wrestle with this question at length – I shouldn’t say necessarily the first person to wrestle with it – but probably the one that most of you owe a debt of gratitude to is Martin Luther. That’s because Luther read, Romans, and he said the way you understand that contrast concerning is the problem with relying on the law is it is legalism, that is, trying to earn God’s salvation by performing good works. So what Paul is speaking out against, then, when he says you can’t be justified, or you can’t be saved, by
keeping the law but only by faith in Christ, Paul is responding to legalism. He’s saying no one can be saved by performing good works. You can’t do it; you can’t do enough works to earn and merit God’s favor. So, the only option is to abandon good works and to solely trust in Jesus Christ, to have faith in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross and his resurrection for your salvation and your justification. We’ll talk more about the word “justify,” or “justification,” at a later time. But Luther was convinced that Paul was addressing the issue of legalism when he said you can’t be saved by works of the law but only by faith, that is you can’t earn God’s favor, you cannot be saved, by performing good works but only by giving that up and abandoning that and solely trusting in Jesus Christ.

How many of you have read Romans like that or that’s what you think? A few of you, okay. Again, if you do, you’ve been directly influenced by Martin Luther, and more than anyone, his legacy of reading Romans has impacted the way we’ve been taught to read it today. Now, Martin Luther’s view of Romans, that Paul is combating legalism, is mainly the reason the law can’t justify is because no one can do it; we cannot earn God’s favor. The problem Paul’s addressing is trying to earn God’s favor by keeping the law, and you can’t do that: no one can keep God’s commands to the extent necessary. No one can keep perfectly; we all fall short. Therefore, the only recourse is to trust in Christ and his death and his work on the cross.

That view predominated actually until the 20th century, when in the 1970s, a scholar named E. P. Sanders – all you need to know is the last name Sanders. Again, several hundred years later Sanders comes along, and he challenged Martin Luther’s way of reading Romans; obviously, Martin Luther wasn’t there anymore to defend himself. But he challenged Luther’s way and said, no, Luther misunderstood Paul. Luther was reading his own situation back into Paul, and that is, if you remember, Luther was raised in a situation where he looked around his church, and he thought that they had become so legalistic and relying on buying indulgences and this and that. He became increasingly frustrated with that and his inability – and it’s through that he was confronted afresh with this message of – you can see why when he would read the verse, “you’re not saved by
works of the law but faith in Christ,” that he would equate that with his own situation. No, we’re not saved by good works that we perform; we’re not saved by trying to earn God’s favor but only by grace – God’s grace – and through faith in Jesus Christ.

But Sanders said, no, Luther and those who have followed him have not paid attention to the Old Testament and to the literature of Judaism. Remember, we talked a little bit about some of the literature of Judaism, like the Mishnah, and we mentioned a few pieces of literature, the Talmud, et cetera. Well, he said, when you read the literature, the Jews in the first century and in the Old Testament were not legalistic. They did not think that they earned God’s favor by obeying the Law of Moses. Sanders said instead, they thought – every Jew would have thought – that you’re saved by God’s grace; it was God who delivered and rescued you. It was an act of God’s grace that he saved you. Where the law came in is it was simply as a way of expressing your obedience to God: obeying the law didn’t get you in, only God’s grace and faith got you in, but what kept you there was obedience to the law, and hence the term “nomism.” That is, nomism is basically that the works of the law were a response to God’s grace; the works of the law just demonstrate how God’s people were to live. Those who had been, we would say today saved by grace, those who had experienced God’s grace as God’s people, the Jews, then, would express that and continue that through obedience to the law. Again, he called that “nomism” or “covenantal nomism.” But just remember the word “nomism;” it forms a nicer parallel with legalism. So, nomism means that the law functioned to express how the Jews were to live as God’s people.

So, Sanders said the only problem Paul had with the law, then, is not that it was legalistic: the only problem was that it wasn’t Christian. Christ had already come. So, he said, with the coming of Christ, the law is no longer necessary to determine who are God’s people. That was basically Sanders’ suggestion. So, Paul is not speaking against these legalistic Jews who are trying to earn God’s favor by keeping a list of rules and regulations. No, they would’ve thought that they were saved by God’s grace, and they would’ve kept the law as a means of remaining as God’s people, of living out their lives as Jews. So
when Paul says you’re not saved by works of the law but by faith in Christ, basically what he’s saying – now that Christ has come, the law doesn’t really play a role any longer. That was Sanders.

No, there’s one more piece of the puzzle: another person came along named James Dunn, a British scholar, and he said Sanders was right that the Jews were not these cold, hard legalists we’ve made them out to be, that all of them were trying to earn God’s favor and thought that they could somehow do enough good works to please God and that’s what would save them, but instead he said Sanders is right. The Jews thought that they were saved by God’s grace, and the law, then, was simply a means of maintaining that and expressing their identity as God’s people.

But what had Paul so upset? Well, Dunn’s answer was the problem Paul’s addressing was not legalism à la Martin Luther trying to earn God’s favor, neither was the problem just nomism, but he said the problem was nationalism. That is, the problem was, by focusing on the law, the Jews were too closely tying the promises of salvation to being a Jew. In other words, the difficulty was Jews were excluding Gentiles by focusing on the law, by making the law a factor. So, they weren’t using the law to earn God’s favor, they were using the law to basically exclude Gentiles and to show that the true people of God are those who are in the covenant with Moses, and they keep the Mosaic Law. That’s what identifies them as God’s people. So, if you don’t obey the Law of Moses, you’re missing the main identity marker, you’re missing the crucial feature that marks you out as God’s people. So the problem then, was nationalism: the promises of God, the promises of salvation were too closely linked with the Law of Moses and with being a Jew, and Paul wants to remove that and open up the promises to include not just Jews but Gentiles as well. So the problem’s basically a national one, not legalistic as Luther thought.

Although probably the church of Rome would have been both Jews and Gentiles, in fact what would this have said especially to non-Christian Jews? But most likely, Paul would be addressing Christian Jews at this point who belong to the church. One interesting thing is mostly, were Jews, all the way in Rome? Yes, this is something that
scholars call the Diaspora, or the dispersion. There were strong Jewish communities in most of the cities that Paul addressed. Even in Corinth – Paul tells us that, in Corinthians and in Acts, we read about that. Most of the cities, including Rome, would’ve had sizable Jewish populations.

Most likely, Paul’s addressing a church that is both Jew and Gentile, and the difficulty may be with Jews still wanting to cling to the Old Testament law as their identity marker, according to Dunn, and then wanting the Gentiles to follow suit, and also keep the Law of Moses. Again, this is what is often called the New Perspective or New Look on Paul or Paul’s undergone an extreme makeover since the time of Martin Luther. Paul is seen as not telling us that you need to stop trying to earn your salvation by doing as many good works as you can. Instead, the problem’s a very different one: he’s telling the Jews you need to stop excluding Gentiles by limiting the gospel to only those who observe the law.

Sanders and Dunn are kind of the New Look – actually, Dunn, I think, is the first one who used the word “New Perspective” or “New Look on Paul.” The old approach I’m basically suggesting is Luther and the new approach is Sanders and Dunn. According to the old approach, the problem that Paul was addressing was the human inability to keep the law because of sin. So, when Paul says you can’t be justified by works of the law why? According the Luther, because of sin, nobody can keep the law to the extent necessary; if you wanted to be saved by keeping the law, you have to keep perfectly. Because of sin, no one can do that; therefore, it’s legalism to try to earn God’s favor by keeping the law. And therefore, the only option is faith in Jesus Christ. The main problem was human inability to keep the law because of sin. According to the New Perspective, the main problem is not human inability and sin, the main problem was Jewish exclusivism: that is, the Jews excluding Gentiles by too narrowly tying God’s promises of salvation to the Law of Moses, to being a Jew. Therefore, they exclude Gentiles.

Another way to compare them is to see that they’re both addressing different questions. According to Luther, he said the question Paul’s addressing was how is a
sinner made right before a holy God? As a sinner who stands before a holy God, how am I made right? How can I enter into a relationship with a holy God? So the focus is vertical, whereas under the New Perspective with Dunn and Sanders, they say no, that’s not the main question Paul’s answering. Paul instead is answering, how do Gentiles and Jews relate to each other? How do Gentiles become included into the people of God? Do they have to keep the law? Do they have to live life as a Jew?

And finally, the focus is different. According to Luther, the focus is more individual: again, how do I, as a sinner, stand before a holy God? Whereas the New Perspective is more communal: it’s not about individuals relating to God – it’s about Jews and Gentiles relating to each other. What does it mean to belong to the true people of God? On what basis will Gentiles be included in the one people of God? James Dunn saw the law mainly in terms of what he called identity badges or markers, that is the law was seen as, especially circumcision for males, especially Sabbath and food laws – those are the things that really mark out the Jews as God’s people, distinguish them from Gentiles. And so again, when Paul says no one can be saved by keeping the law, basically what he’s saying is that salvation cannot be restricted by these identity markers. Belonging to God’s people is not just belonging to the Jewish nation and obeying the law and identifying with these badges – these identity badges – such as circumcision and food laws et cetera. But now, it comes solely by faith in Jesus Christ. If it’s based on Jesus Christ, then Jew and Gentile can now both equally be God’s people.

Do you see the differences between the two approaches? Again, one’s very individualistic: how do I stand before a holy God? Not by legalism, not by earning God’s favor by doing good works, but only by faith in Christ. Whereas the other one says, “No, no, the issue is who are the true people of God? How will Gentiles be accepted as God’s people? Do they have to observe the Law of Moses or can Gentiles become God’s people? Can they be included even apart from the Law of Moses? That’s the problem that the New Perspective said Paul was addressing in Romans.

So, I guess you wonder, who we going to follow? A possible solution is, again, I
wonder why we necessarily have to exclude either of them. So I’ll be New Perspective and I’m not going to exclude: I’ll include the most. So, on the one hand, I think the New Perspective is probably correct that Paul is addressing the issue of Jew-Gentile relationship. Jewish exclusivism is a problem; forcing Gentiles to observe the Law of Moses as a sign that they belong to the true people of God is an issue that Paul is addressing. So, I think we can agree with the New Perspective, and certainly we shouldn’t portray every last Jew as some cold, hard legalist in the New Testament. From that perspective, the New Perspective probably has gotten it right, as Paul addressing the issue, who are the true people of God? On what basis will Gentiles be included in God’s people? Do they have to live lives as a Jew, to have to observe the Law of Moses as an identity marker that marks them out and distinguishes them as God’s people?

However, in addressing this issue, in my opinion, is part of another issue: this issue of, who are the true people of God? On what basis will Gentiles belong to the people of God? When you start raising those questions that’s part of the other issue, what is required of salvation? Is faith in Jesus Christ enough, or must one rely on the Law of Moses? Or we might say, in the other work that would distinguish among who’s God’s people. How do Jew and Gentiles relate? What’s required to belong to the people of God? What is required of Gentiles if they belong to God’s people simply raises a larger issue: how does one stand before a holy God? So, I think, in this instance, Luther was right, also. So I think the appropriate response and the appropriate way to read Romans, in my opinion, is to see both approaches, both perspectives being addressed throughout the book of Romans. So, we’ll look at it that way and read it from that perspective.

This issue again will come up just is acutely in the book of Galatians. Alright, there are a few passages I want to look at in just a little bit more detail in Romans. But have a good weekend, and I will see you on Monday.