

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

May it Never Be! Ideas that Paul Abhors

by Bob DeWaay

May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, That Thou mightest be justified in Thy words, And mightest prevail when Thou art judged. (Romans 3:4)

What would be an appropriate Christian response to the following objections: Israel's unbelief nullifies God's faithfulness, God is unrighteous in inflicting wrath, faith nullifies the Law, our continued sin would benefit grace, being free from the Law means we can continue to sin, the Law is sin, God is unjust in showing mercy to some and not others, and God has rejected Israel? Paul's answer was *may it never be*.

Ten times in Romans Paul wrote *may it never be* the strongest words available to him to express his disgust with certain ideas or teachings. The Greek phrase is *μη γένοιτο* (*m genoito*). Literally it means *may it never come into existence*. Leon Morris states, *It is Paul's most emphatic repudiation of any idea to which it refers*¹ and is often used by Paul to refute any possible false implication that might be drawn from his teaching.² In this article, we will examine the ideas that are so repulsive to Paul that they cause him to exclaim, *may it never be*.

That Unbelief Nullifies God's Faithfulness

The first *may it never be* in Romans concerns God's faithfulness to the Jews (Romans 3:1-4). Paul has argued that circumcision will not save Jews who do not fully keep the Law (Romans 2:26-29). Yet God made many promises to the Jews and committed to them the oracles of God (Romans 3:1). *Their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God will it?* [verse

3]; *may it never be! Let God be true, though every man be found a liar.*

In theological discussion, many are tempted to take up positions that question basic truths about God's nature. To Paul nothing is more reprehensible. As we will see, questioning God's holy nature is often the cause of Paul exclaiming, *May it never be*. To question God's faithfulness or truth is to question God's existence. The very basis on which we must come to God, faith, requires trust in God's self-revealed nature. To claim to believe in God and simultaneously deny God's faithfulness would make one double-minded (James 1:1-8).

To come to God at all requires belief that He is. *And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6)*. Human failure and unbelief cannot be construed as evidence against God's faithfulness. Doubting that God is just and true is a failure to *believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*. According to Paul, those who claim belief in God and deny His faithfulness are the liars, never God. The problems are always with man, not God. Humans lie and are by nature unfaithful. If something seems to fail, it is man and not God who has failed.

Over the years, many people seeking counsel have laid out their accusations against God. They claim that God had given them bad parents, bad experiences, a lack of talent, and less happiness and success than others around them. Many popular theories circulate about people not being able to love God because their Father image was determined by their earthly father. This simply reinforces the notion that God the Father who was rightly understood to have given them their earthly fathers was to blame for their sorrows. I have often quoted Romans 3:4 to such people. In my opinion, if it

were necessary to go through life with emotional hurts, it would be better to do that than to dishonor God for the sake of supposed healing. We will be healed more quickly by honoring God who is faithful even when we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13) than by accusing God of failing to give us what we think we need.

May it never be ought to be the first response in our hearts to any thought that God is unfaithful or false. There are many liars in the world, but God will never be one of them. If we feel that He is, then we know how badly we need our minds renewed by God's word. Paul saw how quickly people excuse their own failures by questioning God's faithfulness and truth. Thus he uttered his first *may it never be* in that context. Man's sin can never be attributed to any lack in God. As Paul said, *God will prevail whenever He is judged*. This theme will be repeated.

That God is Unrighteous In Inflicting Wrath

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world? (Romans 3:5,6)

As he often does, Paul anticipates an objection which is based on a possible implication of his teaching. Paul's teaching was that the wickedness of the rebellious human race shows by way of contrast the excellencies of God's righteousness. God's righteous and just nature is demonstrated in allowing sin and then judging it. William Hendricksen nicely paraphrases the objector's idea: *On the basis of your doctrine, Paul, since man's unrighteousness brings out more sharply God's righteousness, should not the Almighty be happy about that turn of events?*³ Paul himself offers a version of this objection: *And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), Let us do evil that good may come? (Romans 3:8a)*.

Sinful man comes up with these objections to shift the blame for his own rebellion. Paul teaches that God allows evil for a reason. The ultimate purpose of all things is God's glory. God chooses

to allow evil and then judge it. God's glorious nature is manifested in all His providential dealings, but sinful man objects to this teaching and seeks to refute it by drawing erroneous conclusions. If God is glorified in judging evil, then I will do my part, I will do more evil and contribute to God's glory. May it never be! Paul says that those who reason like this face a perfectly just condemnation "Their condemnation is just" (**Romans 3:8b**).

God is the righteous judge and will judge the world in righteousness (**Psalms 9:8**). Modern people, even many evangelicals, raise the same objections to Paul's teachings today. Some assert that when He created the world, God did not know evil choices would be made. Thus they would save Him from implication in evil. Some claim that God is handcuffed by His own creation and would like to do something about evil but cannot without human cooperation. We should be as abhorred at these crass, unbiblical attempts to detract from God's immutable attributes as Paul was at perversions of Christian teaching in his day. They are merely humanistic attempts to make God's dealings with His own creatures more acceptable to the carnal mind. God is the righteous Judge, God is glorified in all things, and God has allowed evil to persist in His own universe though He clearly could have put an end to it long ago.

Any Christian theist would have to admit that God did not have to allow Satan into the garden of Eden. He could have wiped out Adam and Eve immediately after their sin and not allowed them to propagate a sinful human race. He could have brought about the final judgment long ago and thrown all evil beings into hell. That God did not do these things but chose rather to allow evil and redeem some out of it through the cross is the manifestation of God's infinite wisdom. Let us honor God and dispense with foolish arguments that merely obscure the truth.

That Faith Nullifies the Law

Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law. (**Romans 3:31**)

This passage serves as an introduction to chapter 4 where Paul argues that the O.T. Scriptures teach salvation by faith. Abraham and David are cited as

examples (**Romans 4:1-8**). Paul uses the term law in several different ways in Romans. Here it likely refers to the Scriptures, mentioned in **Romans 4:3**.⁴

Salvation by faith, far from being nullified by the Law, is taught by it. From Abraham to Malachi, the idea that sinful humans needed to humbly turn their hearts to God in faith is clearly found. Old Testament saints were not saved by perfect, sinless obedience to the law, but by trusting God and His appointed means for forgiveness. Paul's proof texts for this are Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:1,2. By turning to God in faith (meaning humble trust) we establish the law by following the example of those it commends. Salvation by faith is taught by the law, so faith could hardly nullify it! May it never be that we construe faith as revealed in the New Testament to be a fundamental rejection of God's purposes revealed in the Old. Faith is the message of the whole Bible.

That Grace Would be Enhanced By Further Sin

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? (**Romans 6:1,2**)

Today, as in Paul's day, Christians seek clever ways to subvert the doctrines of grace. Since Paul taught grace, he was accused of antinomianism (being against law). The key phrase is this: *But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more* (**Romans 5:20b**). The obstinate objector to the doctrine of grace seeks to thwart it by reasoning,

Good, let us help grace to abound by sinning all the more. The purpose is to cast doubt on the validity of Paul's teaching by mocking it.

Grace is an enabling gift from God, not earned or deserved. Grace is God's gift to deal with the consequences of sin, but also to give victory over it. Grace is not about God leaving us in our sins and overlooking them. God's grace forgives sins through the blood atonement. One implication of the blood atonement is that the recipients of grace have been united with Christ in the likeness of His death (**Romans 6:5**). Having died to sin, we come alive to God.

Romans 5 is about the analogy between Adam and Christ. To this day, people claim that it is not fair that the

whole race was found guilty in Adam, both legally and practically. Many want to formulate an unbiblical theology that asserts each person comes into the world neutral or innocent and has to rise or fall on his own. But it is not this way. In Adam all die (**1 Corinthians 15:22a**). The Law did not end the problem, but showed just how serious it is. The solution is in Christ: *For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ* (**Romans 5:17**). The only righteous act that can avail for the guilt of the Adamic race is that of Jesus Christ in dying for our sins.

Those Christian objectors who complain about guilt in Adam will have to also complain about being righteous in Christ if they are to be consistent. One reason for Paul's may it never be exclamations, is that people so cling to pride that accepting our wretchedness and helplessness is difficult. Grace as taught by the Spirit inspired apostle is truly grace and has no room for human virtue, merit or boasting. We are in Christ by an act of God not man (**1 Corinthians 1:30**). This is too humbling so we object, if God made me alive while I was still a sinner, and grace was given while I was still a carnal sinful man, then why not keep sinning now, what's the difference? That is the objection to Paul's teaching put in modern jargon.

Paul so abhors this idea that it gets two may it never be's: *What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!* (**Romans 6:15**). Did you know that grace has a message to teach? Consider this: *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age* (**Titus 2:11,12**). Objectors to grace think there is something they do or did first that warrants grace. Grace is a gift and recipients of this gift are taught to deny ungodliness and worldly desires. Those with no motivation to do so show that they have not received grace.

The gift of God frees us from being slaves to sin, and makes it possible for us to present our members to God as slaves

of righteousness. (**Romans 6:19**). People who have not received the grace of God unto salvation have no willingness, desire, or ability to do this. They do not consider their sin slavery but freedom. They are free to do things Christians are not. In fact sinners have many more choices than Christians. But all of them are sinful and lead to death. Grace never leads to more sin, but to righteousness.

That if the Law Arouses Sinful Passions, Then The Law is Sin

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, You shall not covet. (Romans 7:7)

Here Paul is explaining what he meant when He said that the Law aroused sinful passions (verse 5). The simple explanation is that the Law does not cause sin, it makes one aware of it. The sinful passions were already there in every Adamic sinner. Without the special revelation that comes through the Law (here referencing the tenth commandment), the sinner would hardly worry about coveting. It seems natural to the sinner to want what others have, and strong desires along those lines are hardly seen as something to struggle against. But if the same sinner comes under a command to not covet, he is aware that it is a sin and finds himself powerless to stop it.

A man may, under fear of punishment or exposure, refrain from committing adultery (**Exodus 20:14**). But when told that he must not even covet his neighbor's wife (**Exodus 20:17**) he finds himself inwardly failing the Law. If only verse 14 applied, many sinners could claim to have kept the Law. Verse 17 exposes all as sinners. The Law thus makes us aware of our lost and sinful condition. As James teaches, failing the Law at one point makes one guilty of the whole (**James 2:10**). Paul, as a righteous Pharisee, may have been able to have claimed obedience to the first nine laws of the decalogue. But the tenth did him in. Jesus sermon on the mount likewise pulls the rug out from under self-confidence and self-righteousness.

Thus the Law is not sin, it is good

(**Romans 7:12**). It is good that we have special revelation about God's nature and purposes. We would still be sinful if the only revelation we had was general revelation through the creation (**Romans 1**). If the only knowledge of right and wrong we had was our own conscience (**Romans 2:14,15**) we would still be sinful. And the Jews having the Law were also sinful (**Romans 2:23**). Yet they have many advantages (**Romans 3:1,2**). But in spite of that, Law does not save them. They need the grace of God in Christ as badly as the Gentiles.

The law did not cause death, it revealed far more fully the true cause of death and the need for forgiveness. Paul also used may it never be twice about this issue: *Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful (Romans 7:13)*. The Law is not sin, and the Law did not cause spiritual death. Sin is the cause and God's righteous revelation showed how utterly horrible sin is. The Law of God shows sin to be what it is. The idea of blaming God's Law for the problem of sin and death is so abhorrent to the apostle that he wishes it to never come into existence.

That God is Unjust

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! (Romans 9:14).

Paul again anticipates an objection to his teaching. In **Romans 9**, Paul is answering an important question: Why are not more of the Jews being saved? (**Romans 9:1-5**). It seemed possible that it was because the promises of God had failed (**Romans 9:6**); but this could not be. Paul does not give the answer most modern evangelicals want to hear! **Romans 9** causes some so much consternation that they are loath to read it. They expect Paul to answer the question differently than he does. If God promised to save the Jews, then why are so few believing upon Christ?

The expected answer is that God tried to save all the Jews, but failed to do so because of their own free-wills. The typical modern evangelical believes that the promises of God depend upon the

will of His own creatures, who hold veto power over everything God purposes to do. If this were true and Paul knew it, then he would have had an easy answer to the question and could have saved us the consternation of having to read **Romans 9**! He could have said, God's purpose and eternal decree was to save them all, but His plans failed because of human choices, end of discussion. What did Paul write?

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel (Romans 9:6).

Simply put, genetics will not save Israel. God never promised to save every individual: *That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants (Romans 9:8)*. If God's promise and purpose was to save each and every Israelite, then the Old Testament record would clearly show that God's word has failed, which is something Paul denied. For example, most of the people who came out of Egypt died in unbelief (**Heb. 3:17-19**).

The center piece of Paul's argument is found in the account of Jacob and Esau:

And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, The older will serve the younger. Just as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. (Romans 9:10-13)

God's purpose, according to His choice (not man's) was to call Jacob to Himself and transform him into Israel. Paul emphasizes the fact that this was announced to Rebekah before they were born or had done anything good or bad. God's promise did not fail!

Why does this promise to Rebekah about Jacob cause Paul to anticipate an objection? Because fallen humans will cry unfair. We would rob the Creator of the right to do what He pleases with His own creation. It is utter insolence for anyone to question God's justice. Yet this happens continually, even by professed Christians. I have had more

than one Christian say to me, If God chooses some for salvation and not others, then I will not serve Him. Think about this carefully. This statement is not saying I have carefully studied all the Scriptures that pertain to this matter and have solid evidence that no one in particular is chosen by God. If that were the case we could ask for the evidence and examine it. The demand that God do it our way or else we will refuse to serve Him is far worse. It is the very thing Paul abhors.

Those who say such things claim that God does not have the sovereign right to do as He pleases with His own creation or if He does, they charge Him with injustice. The may it never be shows that the apostle has different sensitivities than much of watered down, modern evangelicalism. We seem to have no fear of offending or dishonoring God. The very notion that God has chosen us from the foundation of the world ought to invoke loving praise and adoration toward a merciful God who gave grace to wretched, unworthy creatures. Instead of honoring God, many get angry and charge God with injustice because He did not save everyone.

Listen to Paul, lest we think we misunderstood him: *For He says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy (Romans 9:15,16).* If any person has good Biblical reasons why we should think Paul does not mean what he seems quite clearly to be saying here, then bring them forth. But may it never be that the creature should charge the Creator with injustice. Paul has already proven in **Romans 1-3** that if God condemned the whole race to hell no injustice would be done. If some are saved, how then does that create injustice? Salvation is mercy. I fear that the problem with the current professing church is a lack of respect for God's sovereignty. Many glibly say things that made the apostle shudder in abhorrence. *On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, Why did you make me like this, will it? (Romans 9:20)*

That God Rejected Israel

The final two instances of Paul's abhorrence of an idea concern God's purposes for Israel. In **Romans 11** Paul is still on the theme of Israel and why so few had responded to the gospel. Paul is concerned that no one mistake his teaching as being anti-Jewish. Paul affirms his own Jewishness and reminds us that even at the worst of times in Israel's history, God preserved a faithful remnant: *But what is the divine response to him [Elijah]? I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal. In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace (Romans 11:4-6).*

The idea is: if God preserves a remnant for Himself, then God preserves His promises to Israel. God loves the Jews and a key principle is to the Jew first (**Romans 1:16**). God mercifully grafts Gentiles into the Jewish olive tree (**Romans 11:17-24**), but we should not boast as if we deserved such treatment. Even the fact that God has saved many Gentiles has a loving purpose toward Israel. This is the point of the last may it never be in **Romans**.

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. (Romans 11:11). God's purposes for the Jews and national Israel are not finished. They have not fallen permanently nor irredeemably.

Romans 11:25 shows that the hardening of Israel is partial and temporary. May it never be that God has rejected Israel. Unbiblical replacement theology makes just that claim. Paul considers the very idea abhorrent. Being a recipient of mercy should never cause one to boast or to think that there is anything in us that is more deserving than in those who have not yet experienced mercy. We should pray for the Jews (like Paul, **Romans 10:1**), that they may come to faith in Messiah.

Conclusion

We can find a unifying theme in the ten may it never be's of **Romans**. They all seek to preserve the glory, honor and

righteousness of God. Ideas that dishonor God should be immediately recognized as such and driven from our minds. As our minds are renewed by the Word of God, we will become more sensitive to the awesome truths about God's holy nature. It will be more important to us that God is honored than that our teaching is popular in the eyes of fallen man. God cannot lie, be unjust, be the author of sin, or fail to fulfill His promises. Any notion to the contrary should be firmly resisted.

It is interesting that Paul concludes the section of **Romans** that deals with these essential doctrinal truths (**Romans 1-11**) with a doxology (a confession of God's glory). Things that cause us to get angry, debate, or reject as too controversial or too difficult to understand cause Paul to exclaim God's glory! Doubtless he had insights into the workings of God's divine purposes that we need to learn. I conclude by quoting Paul's doxology:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

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End Notes

1. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 155.
2. Ibid. n. 19.
3. William Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary: Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 112.
4. Some scholars feel that Romans 3:31 serves as a conclusion to the argument in Romans 3 rather than an introduction to chapter 4. In that case it is a reiteration of ideas found in chapter 3. I think the context favors linking it with chapter 4 as I am doing here.

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