

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON #36

# “BELOVED OF GOD, CALLED TO BE SAINTS”

ROMANS

by Ted L. Gibbons

## INTRODUCTION:

Many years ago I found myself under an obligation to attend the Infantry Officers Basic Course (IOBC) at Fort Benning, Georgia, in preparation for time I would spend serving in the United States Army. I spent six weeks learning leadership and military skills and playing military games in the swamps and hills of western Georgia and eastern Alabama. My final week I spent in bivouac, practicing marksmanship and other outdoor skills. The final activity of the course, which came at the end of a truly miserable week of intermittent rains, filthy clothes, sweat and accumulating body odors, was what our leaders called the “Infiltration Course.”

We marched to a large, flat field and were invited to sit in the bleachers on the north and survey the facility. The Army had cleared and leveled a slightly elevated area of perhaps three acres. At the east end of this dirt covered expanse was a retaining wall, eight or nine feet high. Ladders provided access to the top of the wall, which was on the same level with the field. The flatness of the ground was gouged in many places by shallow pits. Across the west end of the area were eight short towers. In each was a M-60 machine gun, positioned to fire live ammunition back and forth across the level expanse before them. These towers marked the end of the infiltration course. “When you pass the gun towers, you are finished with the course,” we were informed.

Once it was dark, our assignment would be to scale the ladders at the back of the infiltration course, and low-crawl across the field toward the guns while they fired *live ammunition* over our heads. “Every eighth round will be a tracer round,” we were told, “so you will be able to see where the firing is as it traverses the area. The guns each fire between eight hundred and one thousand rounds per minute. For every tracer you see, there will be seven rounds you won’t see.”

“How high?” we wanted to know.

“Hard to say,” Sergeant Redd responded with a smirk. “Why don’t you stand up and check it for me when you are out there.”

“What are the circular pits for?” another asked.

“Explosives,” was the reply. “In an actual combat situation, your efforts to

infiltrate a fortified position such as the one represented by the guns, would certainly be hindered by artillery and mortar fire. Random explosions in the pits will simulate that part of the experience.”

Our discussions and questions continued and our dread increased until darkness fell. But in the half hour before our “assault” began, the heavens opened. We realized in an instant that the rain showers we had experienced during the previous week were nothing more than a prelude for the actual performance, which we now witnessed. Sheets of water cascaded from the skies while thunder blasted and lightning crashed through the gathering darkness. It was a rain storm of stunning proportions.

The dirt field before us was transformed in minutes into a quagmire, the flattened expanse becoming a sodden bog. Nevertheless, at the appointed hour, we marched to the rear of the field, encumbered with packs and rifles, and prepared to scale the ladders.

The firing commenced and the infiltration began. I climbed the ladder before me, aware with every rung of the bullets screaming overhead, dumbfounded by the brightness of the tracers that seemed only inches apart. I slithered over the embankment and found myself settling into several inches of rich Georgia mud. I began to crawl forward (I had no other option). The sergeant had instructed us to stay low, and I did. I had a strong desire to *burrow*.

In addition to the clamor of the machine guns and the reverberating roar of thunder, continuous explosions rocked the earth from the pits around me, adding not only to the noise, but blowing gouts of mud and water into the air from whence they fell continuously on me and around me.

I continued to work my way forward, forcing my way down through the yielding mud until my descent was stopped by the firmness of earth not yet saturated by the rains. Finally, I reached the line of the gun towers, arose to my feet, and inspected myself. My pockets, even the buttoned ones on my fatigues, were filled with mud. My boots were massive collections of muck, on the inside and the outside. The grime had found its way into my pants and through the gaps between the buttons of my shirt. Even my rifle, my M-16, which I had cleaned and cared for so religiously during the previous weeks, was fouled, the breech and barrel filled with waterlogged earth.

I slogged my way to the waiting truck and rode shivering back to my barracks where I made my way to the showers. With my rifle and my clothing and my filthy body, I walked in and turned on the water. There, with the warmth of clean water running over me, washing away my filth layer by layer, I began to undress, soaping

and scrubbing until every trace of the scum and sludge was gone. It felt so good to be clean!

I have often thought, since that night, that my experience with the infiltration course was a wonderful metaphor for the experience of mortality. We make our way forward toward the conclusion of our lives, the end of the course, our goal often nearly invisible in the darkness, and our ability to concentrate on that goal fettered by the filth and the noise and the danger of our surroundings.

None of us except the Savior has ever made the journey unblemished. All of us from time to time will find ourselves with mud in our pockets. Paul said that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23.)

But the accumulation of grime is not the most serious problem, provided we do not cling to it in the same way it clings to us. We are invited by the Savior to get into the showers whenever we are inclined to do so. “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil.” (Isaiah 1:16.) Of course it is always the Lord who provides the water for this cleansing: “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity,” David pled, “and cleanse me from mine sin . . . wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” (Psalm 51:2,7.)

And the water is *always available* for those who want to be clean.

Paul’s letter to the Romans is a plea for cleanliness. He recognized that many of the saints, while struggling through the mud of mortality were carrying an unneeded burden of monumental proportions. They were trying to live perfect lives in the useless hope that their own righteousness would save them in the kingdom of God. Paul, even though he knew how important it is to live righteously, knew that the best of us would have need of a cleansing before our lives were through. Romans is, in part, a powerful witness of the cleansing power of the atonement, and of our eternal need for it to be efficacious in our lives.

As you ponder and explore this remarkable letter, let the sweetness and clarity of Paul’s witness warm *and* warn you. You will be saved by grace or you will not be saved at all. Paul’s testimony in Romans 3:10, 12 is perfectly true. “There is none righteous, no, not one . . . They are all gone out of the way.”

Capturing a few words from Romans and other texts to describe myself (and perhaps a few of you as well) I can say with prophetic and scriptural certainty that I am wicked, carnal, sensual, devilish, sinful, unclean, fallen, lost, rebellious, unholy, and unworthy. Given that description of myself, what do I deserve? I deserve Hell, of course. Left to my own devices, I will become, and remain, filthy. I deserve to

suffer for my sins. And the default setting in mortality is on judgement, not mercy. We have got to do something, change the settings, to merit mercy. It is for this *changing* that Paul is pleading.

## **I. WE ARE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST (Romans 2-5)**

Paul wrote to explain why we need to be justified, that is, reconciled to God, pardoned from the punishment we deserve for our sins, and declared righteous and guiltless. We are all under condemnation for our transgressions. He said:

As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. (Romans 3:10-12)

Alma said it another way:

And he doth not dwell in unholy temples; neither can filthiness or anything which is unclean be received into the kingdom of God; therefore I say unto you the time shall come, yea, and it shall be at the last day, that he who is filthy shall remain in his filthiness. (Alma 7:21)

And we cannot justify our selves. Only one who lived a perfect, sinless life could claim the blessings of heaven on the basis of his or her own merits. And none of us meets that criteria, “. . . there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah.” (2 N 2:8)

“Therefore,” Paul explains, “by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight . . .” (Romans 3:20) If we are to be justified, it must be by the atonement of Christ: “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . .” (3:24). We cannot be justified by obedience to the commandments, because all of us have broken (some of) the commandments. “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. “ (3:28)

We have sometimes, in the Church, in effort to distance ourselves from the idea of being saved by grace alone, placed an undue emphasis on works of righteousness, supposing that we are saved more by what we do than by the atonement and

grace—the merits—of Christ. That our own righteousness is a necessary part of our salvation is beyond question. “Faith without works is dead,” dead as petrified wood and week old road-kill. But works without faith is equally dead, and Paul understood that: “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.” (3:31)

Someone has said that we cannot earn our own salvation by our works, but that is the only way we have to let the Savior know that we want it. And of course righteousness and perfection are not synonyms. Hugh Nibley said:

A righteous person is one who is repenting; a wicked person is one who is not repenting. A righteous man is not one who is all good. There is no such person at all. We have all this mixture. And a wicked man is not one who is all bad. We don't have any of either. If you are repenting, it's like being on the stairway. A person at the bottom of the stairs facing up is better off than the person at the top of the stairs facing down, if it's the way of repentance. So this is what we are told. It's never too late, and that's a marvelous thing. But Satan wants to discourage you and say it is too late. Why not go through with it? "I am in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er." In other words, "I might as well go on; a few more murders won't make that much difference. (Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, Semester 1, p.113)

## **II. WE CAN BE REBORN AND BECOME JOINT-HEIRS WITH CHRIST** (Romans 6,8)

One of the terms used by Paul in these chapters has caused a great amount of confusion among Christians since the time of Christ. The word is “predestinate.” Some have seen in this concept the doctrine that we have no control over our ultimate state—that we are driven by immutable destiny, by our having been selected as the elect of God to a heavenly existence, or by our having been rejected by that same God to suffer the wrath of God and his angels throughout the eternities. In fact, I like the whole idea of predestination, provided I am permitted to take it literally.

Every time I have departed on a journey of any consequence, I have done so with a

destination in mind. Whether I have gone to the grocery store or the Holy Land, whether to Brazil or to Brigham City, I have determined beforehand where I intended to do. PREvious to my departing, I have identified my DESTINATION. With regard to the most important journey of my eternal existence, I would certainly have done the same. And God, knowing me and my heart and capabilities, would have guided me in this:

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28) Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. For him whom he did foreknow, he did also predestinate to be conformed to his own image, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Romans 8:29, 30, JST)

And what is that destination we selected before we were born?

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (Romans 8:16-18)

The key, then, is to continue on the path that will lead to our pe-determined destination.

WHAT shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? (Romans 6:1,2)

We must not be side-tracked by sin. We must not allow the natural man (“our old man” [Romans 6:6]) and the attractiveness of other destinations to draw us off the path. When my wife and I traveled to Hawaii in the summer of 1998, we passed through San Francisco, where we had a brief layover. There were planes leaving from the San Francisco Airport minute by minute, with destinations all around the world. With sufficient time and resources we could have changed our minds and

gone almost anywhere. But we left Orem heading for Hawaii, and that was the only place in which we had a real interest. We were pre-destined to go there, and we did. But I have seen friends and relatives change their minds about where they wanted to go, or about the value of going to the place they first selected. Paul knew it had happened to some of the Romans, and wondered how it could have happened:

Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with [him], that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

(Romans 6:6)

### III. WE SHOULD LIVE AS BECOMES SAINTS

Certain phrases from the last part of Romans speak with great power to my heart. It might be worth some of your time to take a look at *sentence sermons* from Romans. Following is a list of 25 of them. Try to rewrite them in your own words and to find the place where they fit into your own life.

1. 6:4 “We also should walk in newness of life.”
2. 6:5 “We shall be in the likeness of his resurrection.”
3. 6:12 “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body.”
4. 6:13 “Yield yourselves unto God.”
5. 6:16 “His servants ye are to whom ye obey.”
6. 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”
7. 7:18 (JST) “I seek to subdue that sin which dwelleth in me.”
8. 8:6 “For to be carnally minded is death . . .”
9. 8:14 “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.”
  
10. 8:17 “Heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ . . .”
11. 8:18 “The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”
12. 8:28 “All things work together for good to them that love God.”
13. 8:31 “If God be for us, who can be against us?”
14. 8:35 “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”
15. 9:6 “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel . . .”
16. 9:20 “Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?”

17. 10:11 “Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.”
18. 11:16 “If the root be holy, so are the branches.”
19. 12:1 “ Present your bodies a living sacrifice.”
20. 12:2 “Be not conformed to this world . . .”
21. 12:20 “ If thine enemy hunger, feed him . . .”
22. 13:10 “Love is the fulfilling of the law.”
23. 14:12 “Every one of us shall give account of himself to God.”
24. 15:1 “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak.”
25. 16:17 “Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.”

## **CONCLUSION:**

As with all scripture, the study of Romans rewards us on many levels. The doctrine is deep, the language is elevating, the broad concepts are well thought out and clearly set forth. Even many of the sentences, pulled without regard for context from the verses, teach us powerful lessons about how saints ought to behave.

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