

# Is God Unfair?

## Insights from the Book of Romans

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*o, life isn't fair," said the journalist*, whose livelihood was touring the world to cover disasters. "Earth-quakes, tsunamis, famines, floods, pandemics, volcanic eruptions—they just happen, and that's all you can say about them. You can work out afterwards what triggered at least some of them, but you can't predict them with any accuracy, and you certainly can't foresee how much damage they will do. They kill thousands at a time, and ruin the lives of thousands more, millions sometimes. They turn this lovely world into a tragic mess, and when you've seen them close to, as I have, you'll know better than to shrug them off and say they don't matter. Life's not fair, and if there's a God who runs the show, he isn't fair either, for it's always the nice folk who suffer most."

"Genetics certainly isn't fair," said the doctor, whose specialty was Huntington's chorea. "Physical and mental handicaps are randomly passed on by genetic transmission; some babies are marked for misery from birth, and all you can offer is palliative care—there's no cure possible. If you had to talk to parents and relatives the way I sometimes have to do, you'd appreciate how awful this is. I believe in God, I think most people do, but sometimes I find myself thinking how unfair—how downright cruel—he seems to be. I'm sure many of those who are in these situations feel the same."

"Well, I've certainly found myself feeling that God is unfair many times these last few months," said the investment adviser. "I was bamboozled and bankrupted by a man in the church whom I'd known for years. We set up together as a Christian firm; we prayed together about it, and I prayed a lot about it on my own. He fiddled the books, absconded with the money, and left me with nothing. I felt God was laughing at me, and it wasn't a good feeling."

"A lot of Christians paint themselves into a corner where they can't help tagging God as unfair," said the publisher. "They say that God loves everyone, and everything is under his control. So the way he wrecks some lives though not others is certainly unfair. If they say God loves some people but not all people, that is unfair in itself. And yet, you know, the Bible tells us that God plays favorites in just that way. You know the little rhyme that says, 'How odd / of God / to choose / the Jews?' Well, according to the Bible he did that, and told the Jews to kill a lot of other tribes to make room for themselves when they invaded Palestine, and sometimes he did the

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killing himself when the Jews were under threat. If that isn't playing favorites, I don't know what is. Nowadays we've got Bible-bashers who insist that God loves nobody but the elect, whoever they are. Is the God of all that callous elitism unfair? As the Brits say, Not half! The God I think I believe isn't like that at all."

By this time they were all looking at Bill.

"Bill," said the journalist, "you've heard what we've just said. If you think we're getting at you, I won't say you're wrong. You've often told us that you're an old-fashioned orthodox Christian who believes the Bible from cover to cover. Be honest now: don't you agree that your God has a lot to answer for? Can't you see that if he exists at all, he's terribly, terribly unfair?"

What is there that Bill can say? That is the question we will explore.

## Who Defines "Fair"?

Look first at what the word *unfair* means in this discussion. The idea of fairness, which forms itself unbidden in every child's mind and has more recently become big in Western political discourse, is a facet of the larger idea of justice. Fairness is held to require, first, that other things being equal, resources, benefits, privileges, and immunities should be distributed evenly (sausages at a cookout, for instance) and, second, that penalties and rewards should be proportioned to what people actually deserve. The second requirement may modify the first, for personal deservings are among the things that are not equal and need to be factored into the distribution if fairness is to be maintained. It is assumed that we owe each other recognition of our intrinsic worth as human beings and concern for each other's welfare; no administrative procedures will be thought fair if they lack this foundation, so that the equity in them is not principled but merely accidental. Fairness is founded on a valuation of people as such.

What do people mean when they say God is unfair? They mean, first, that he does not seem to take account of the worth of particular human beings and, second, that he does not appear to distribute or withhold benefits according to what people deserve. Behind this two-fold complaint lies the assumption that under ordinary circumstances God owes us the life that we think of as good—comfortable, pleasant, pain-free—and that no one should receive from him less than this (save those whom we recognize as socially obnoxious). That assumption, in turn, rests on the idea that as our Creator may tell us our duty to him, so we his creatures may determine his duty to us, and that as God may judge us in an executive way if we fail to obey his laws, so we may judge him intellectually by forming an opinion as to whether he has given us what he owes us or not. Luther chided Erasmus for thoughts of God that were "too human"; assessing God by creaturely standards of fairness surely merits the same criticism.

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Our positive argument against the claim that God is unfair is to be drawn from Scripture—the inspired, infallible, true, trustworthy, and authoritative word of God, and in particular from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Romans is Paul’s fullest and most elaborate statement of the good news God sent him to share; it contains, in brief at least, all the considerations that we shall deploy; it is a single cumulative line of thought, each step of which has greater force because of the power of the whole of which it is part; and it is intensely God-centered from start to finish, parading God’s sovereignty in his grace and his grace in his sovereignty and breaking into the argument three times for doxological exclamation in very strong terms (see 1:25, 9:5, 11:33–36), over and above the further doxology that rounds everything off (16:25–27). The doxological tone of Romans as a whole is important for our present argument, since the effect, and so the test, of all good theology is that it prompts praise. Paul’s exposition, as we shall see, covers all the facts triggering the complaints of God’s supposed unfairness, yet Paul sees reason to keep on praising, and the acid test of the adequacy of what this article will say will be whether it has a similar effect on its readers. May God guide us as we proceed.

## Fairness in the Light of Sin

The argument of Romans begins with an extended demonstration (1:18–3:20) that the whole human race, non-Jew and Jew alike, lies “under the power of sin” (3:9, ESV), and so is guilty in the eyes of our holy and just Creator and can only expect condemnation, rejection, and the pain of retribution on the day when, “according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (2:16). Sin, as we learn more fully in chapters 6 and 7, is to be thought of as a quasi-personal fund of energy operating like a second self within everyone, a demonic slave-driving force that motivates and masters us all in our natural condition and exposes us to the payment of its wages of death as an abiding state (see 6:6, 12–14, 16–23). And even though sin is no longer in full control of those who have been raised into a new life in Christ, it is still active in our system to distress us by causing us constantly to fall short of the perfect obedience to God’s law at which we aim (7:14–25). The fruits of sin in human society are all the impieties and immoralities, all the declinings from God and defiances of him, that are reviewed in 1:18–32, plus all the impenitence, irreverence, moral unreality, and self-righteous hypocrisy that Paul takes apart in 2:1–3:8. His peroration as he rounds off this first section of his argument stresses the universality of sin and its guilt (3:9–20). There are no exceptions; sin rules the race and has done from the start and always will. Western Christian theology expresses this when it speaks of original sin generating actual sin, the perverted egocentrism and anti-God motivation of the natural human heart leading to transgressions of God’s known will in thought, in word, and in deed.

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What follows? Simply this: that God owes us nothing save the retribution of which he forewarns us. Paul is most forthright about this, repeating the thought for emphasis and rubbing our noses in it by the lurid vividness of the rhetoric. “. . . God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works . . . for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek . . . God shows no partiality” (2:5–11). God in his providence certainly gives all kinds of good things to all kinds of people, but since we are all sinners none of us deserves any of it, and all assumptions to the contrary—with their corollaries that God is unfair if he fails to give to all as much as he gives to some—are simply false.

No doubt original sin, with its implication of universal ill-desert from God, is the most difficult of all Christian doctrines for moderns to grasp. We live in a post-Christian era in which it is virtually axiomatic throughout the Western world that everyone is good at heart and we can all learn to be virtuous in every way, and all ideas of original sin and indelible corruption in the human heart were never more than bad dreams, supported sometimes by decadent and corrupt cultures. None of us is as sensitive to evil as our Maker is, for our self-serving inclinations numb our consciences, and we never see what lies deepest in human hearts, whether in us or in others, in the way that “he who searches hearts” does (8:27). The truth is that we are nowhere near loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength as we were designed to do, so we all give offence to God every hour of every day, and if he were guided by the principle of fairness alone—the principle, that is, of giving everyone everything they deserve, he would simply let loose on us the “wrath . . . fury . . . tribulation . . . distress . . .” of which Paul spoke and so wipe us out.

Bill should explain this to his friends, who censure God for not giving pleasant things more widely and not shielding more people from unpleasant things, as if this is what he is under obligation to do. Bill should add that the marvel is how much that is pleasant God does currently give, and how much that would be less than pleasant he currently averts, when in fairness we have no claim on such goodness. This is one aspect of his world-embracing “kindness and forbearance and patience” (2:4), the “common grace” that is meant to lead self-satisfied sinners to repentance. And even more marvelous (Bill should declare) is God’s offer to obnoxious offenders like ourselves of justifying and transforming grace in, through, and under his Son, once criminalized and crucified, now exalted and enthroned, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

## Fairness in the Light of Grace

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“The grace of God is free though costly—love bestowing on the unlovely a destiny of salvation and privilege.”

of salvation and privilege. Paul spells it out in sequential stages from 3:21 to 11:36, all against the background of God’s declared wrath against all human perversity which makes grace, as the hymn says, amazing. Justification by faith through the imputing of righteousness on the basis of Christ’s vicarious sacrifice of himself fills 3:21–4:25 and 5:11–21; this is God’s final acceptance of us for a joyful eternity with Jesus, and is thus the ground of our present assurance and hope (5:1–10). Living holy lives in assured hope through union with Jesus in his death and resurrection and by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and thus experiencing the transformation that God’s grace brings is the theme of chapters 6–8, while Israel’s place in God’s plan of grace is the topic occupying chapters 9–11. In chapter 10, the universality of God’s invitation in the gospel is highlighted. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved . . . there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (10:9–13).

The letter’s final section is on acting out the ethic of grace, which is self-denying neighbor-love, in a multi-racial, multi-cultural church fellowship (12:1–15:13). One incidental implication is important: though in Old Testament times God occasionally inflicted public temporal judgments for sin on whole families, tribes, cities, and nations and used Israel, his people, as his executioners, no form of retributive action, as such, is to have any place in the Christian code. God reserves retribution for the day of judgment, when he will inflict it himself. “Repay no one evil for evil . . . live peaceably with all . . . never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (12:17–19, citing Deut. 32:35). Bill must be able to explain this to his friends.

When all deserve to be rejected by the God who in love moves to reconcile them to himself and renew them in his own moral image, thus preparing them for a destiny of delight with himself, we are out of the realm of both fairness and unfairness. Grace trumps each of them. When the great good given is not only undeserved but contrary to our deservings, we should humbly receive it and give thanks for it, not stand back and complain that in this or that respect it ought to be greater than it is. There is no warrant whatever for the “ought to be” in such complaints.

## Fairness in the Light of Glory

The entire creation, says Paul startlingly, “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God [at Christ’s return]. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (8:19–21). The terms “futility” (non-achievement of its own full excellence)

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and “bondage of decay” (inescapable disintegration) indicate, without going into detail, that powers of chaotic destruction work in the cosmos alongside its intricate interlockings that nurture and enhance human life. Presumably this is the fruit of the curse God pronounced on man’s environment after the Fall (Gen. 3:17–19). The natural disasters and random tragedies rooted in genetics of which Bill’s friends complained would seem to belong here; we can confidently say that no such things will occur when the new heaven and new earth and believers’ resurrection bodies have become matters of fact.

Christian life, then, should be lived as a journey home, in eager hope of the better world that awaits us. Present troubles should be taken in stride. “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (8:18). Nothing that comes our way “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39). “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (8:28). God’s purpose for Christians is holiness and happiness with Christ in glory, and this is the good which, one way or another, he makes all things promote.

Paul states the principle that Christians do and must live by as follows: “. . . justified by faith, we have peace with God . . . and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character [literally, approval as a result of testing], and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame . . .” (5:1–5). With this mindset Paul lived his own tumultuous, battle-scarred life, enduring his thorn in the flesh, his other physical hardships and his constant relational hazards (“danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles . . . danger from false brothers” [2 Cor. 11:26]), and he teaches all Christians to live their lives this way also. Those who do so, like Paul, are kept wholly free from bitterness, and become unsinkable.

Plainly, the categories of fair and unfair are here once more transcended, this time by the certainty that God sanctifies all troubles as moral training, maturing discipline, and so preparation for glory. Knowing this, Christians under pressure become “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (8:37). “If all that I meet / shall turn to my good, / the bitter is sweet, / the medicine food” (John Newton).

Here is a further matter for Bill to explain to his friends.

## Is Election Unfair?

Those who would accuse God of unfairness commonly go straight to Romans 9, where Paul is arguing that though most Jews in his day rejected Christ, God’s word promising Israel blessing when Messiah came had not failed—that is, proved false. To make his point, Paul affirms the following:

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1. Earlier general promises of blessing to and through Abraham's descendants were later specified by God himself as finding fulfillment in some descendants only, not all (9:6–13);
  2. God is free to specify in this way as he wishes, and cannot be accused of injustice when he does so, since he owes mercy to none, and has purposes other than mercy for some, as the Old Testament already showed (9:14–18);
  3. As God's creatures (and sinners into the bargain, according to 1:18–3:20, a fact that Paul never forgets even if his critics do), we cannot deny God his right to appoint contrary destinies in this way (9:19–21); and
  4. God has actually called some Jews and some Gentiles to be his people through faith in Christ—"vessels of mercy" displaying his glory—while patiently enduring "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction," against whom he will show his wrath later on (9:22–29).

The complaint here is that God appears to appoint destinies arbitrarily, treating human beings as pieces on a chessboard or robots to be programmed, and ignoring the reality of free will which (so it is claimed) is the true determiner of the direction and destination of one's life. This, it is said, is unfair, and so indeed it would be if things were as stated—but they are not. Overlooked in this objection is the fact that "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot" (8:7). "Hostile" is "enmity" in the Greek; Paul uses an abstract-noun-for-adjective idiom that is the equivalent of italicizing, or capitalizing, for maximum emphasis. His statement is as strong as he can make it: by nature and of their own free will, human beings in Adam, fallen from God and twisted inside, are all adamantly anti-God, in a way that they themselves cannot change. The truth of this must be faced squarely. The idea that left to themselves some might choose a better path than God has appointed for them is cloud-cuckoo-land thinking. There is no divine unfairness, then, in Romans 9.

Nor is there anything unfair about the non-universality of the divine action whereby the heart is changed. This is the action leading to faith that Paul labels calling, and that later theology was to label effectual calling to mark it off from the universal invitation of which Jesus had spoken (Matt. 22:14; see verses 1–14). What we must grasp is that free will (a power of choice free from external compulsion) is a function of the inner essence of a person, what the Bible calls the heart, and it is God's action in calling that opens the heart so that Christ and his way are freely embraced in response to the gospel invitation. God calls the elect in this sense in order to justify them and so prepare them for glory (8:30, 9:23). This is grace at work. It is the way of grace, as Paul insists in 11:5–6, to be selective (it extends to "a remnant" of the Jews), but since God owes grace to nobody it is not unfair that he does not bestow it on everybody. What Paul is talking about in 3:21–11:36, and

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what he praises God for at the close of chapter 11, is not his fairness but his mercy.

So the complaint that God is unfair, which supposes itself smart, is actually shallow; Romans alone outflanks it at all points. Romans shows us the grace of God's wisdom, and the wisdom of his grace, and sets us praising: "From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (11:36). May our praise never end.

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