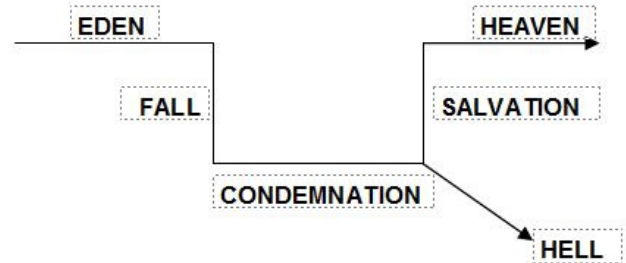


In my Psychology 101 class many years ago now, we did an interesting experiment looking at how our eyes and brain interact to perceive the world. I put on a specially constructed pair of eye glasses that shifted everything I saw 15 degrees to the right. It was pretty humorous for my lab partner, but very frustrating for me, as I would reach out to grab a pencil on the desk in front of me and miss it by six inches. But the purpose of the experiment was not just to make me look uncoordinated. The purpose of the experiment was to show us that as I wore these lenses for 10-15 minutes, my eyes and brain talked to each and made adjustments, and pretty soon I had no trouble picking up the pencil and could even walk around the room without running into things. Even though these lenses gave me a shifted view of reality, my brain got so used to seeing things this way that I soon was not even aware that I was looking at things from the wrong point of view. If I wore the lenses for several hours and then took them off, it would be just as discombobulating for me to relearn to see things as they really are.

When we read the Bible, and especially Paul's letter to the Romans, we have to be aware that many, if not most of us, have bit fitted with a set of lenses that skews our vision and makes us miss the central point of Jesus' teaching. This set of lenses is a conceptual framework that comes from sources outside the Bible (mostly Greek philosophy), yet we have used this set of lenses for so long and have interpreted the Biblical story through these lenses for so long that we are not even aware that we are wearing them and that these lenses prevent us from seeing and understanding the true story.

With the help of a few K'nex pieces, I'll give a quick summary of the Biblical story in six lines and you see if it doesn't sound familiar. (This six-line framework is described by Brian McLaren in his book, *A New Kind of Christianity*.)

1. God creates a perfect world (Eden).
2. Humans disobey God and sin comes into the world, causing a broken relationship between God and humanity. This is sometimes called "The Fall."
3. Condemnation is where we live, a bunch of sinful people in a messed up world.
4. But God comes to us in Jesus, who dies for our sins and gives us salvation, saving us from our sins.
5. If we believe in Jesus as our savior we return to the perfection of heaven when we die.
6. If we do not believe in Jesus, we go to hell for eternity.



This is pretty much the way I learned the story, and I'm guessing you're nodding along and saying, "yep, that's pretty much the Christian story in a nutshell."

So when we read Paul's letter to the Romans, we hear his words and they fit pretty well into this six line framework. All of the following phrases come from Romans, many of them from the section we read today.

- Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man (Adam), and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned (5:12)
- Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. (5:18)
- But now, the righteousness of God has been disclosed... (3:21)
- For though all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus... (3:23-24)
- While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (5:6)
- Now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God (5:9)
- Through [Jesus] we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. (5:2)

We hear these words and they all fit well into this six-line framework. Sin came into this world, we are all sinful, but Christ died for the ungodly so that we are justified by his blood and thereby saved from the wrath of God and boast of sharing the glory of God in heaven when we die.

But there is a major problem with this understanding of what Paul is saying here, and the problem lies in the fact that we read his words through the lens of this six-line framework. We hear words Paul uses like righteousness, faith, salvation, and wrath of God and assume they have the meanings assigned by the six-line framework and that Paul's purpose in writing is to tell his readers they have a choice to make – either believe in Jesus and go to heaven or ignore Jesus and go to hell. If Paul were here today and we gave him this summary of what we understand him to say, I believe he would respond, “What are you talking about? Where do you get this notion of heaven and hell? I don't even mention hell in this letter. Where did you get this framework, this lens? It's foreign to me.”

Paul is very clear at the beginning of his letter in stating his purpose in writing. This is the key statement we read last week – “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.” If we ignore that last phrase, “to the Jew first and also to the Gentile,” we miss the underlying theme of this letter and get a skewed understanding of what Paul is saying. Paul is addressing the same contentious issue that we read about in Acts three weeks ago in the story of Peter and Cornelius and the following week in the story of Barnabas and Paul. That question that the early church struggled with is, “How can Jews and Gentiles in all their diversity come and remain together as peers in the kingdom of God without having first- and second-class Christians while still embracing their religious traditions?”

Paul writes this letter to make the point that Jesus' gospel of the kingdom must welcome Jews in their Jewishness and Gentiles in their own culture. Paul refuses to allow Jesus' expansive and revolutionary gospel of the kingdom of God be fenced in by the categories of anyone's exclusive religion. So to understand Paul's argument in Romans, we have to keep his purpose in mind. He is not writing a well-edited, linear thought dissertation on how to get to heaven, but uses a series of metaphors that move from his starting point (the gospel of the kingdom of God) to his ultimate point (the kingdom is for Jew and Gentile alike).

Last week we read sections of chapter 1-3 where Paul makes the case that Jews and Gentiles all have equal standing before God – they are all unrighteous. As Paul uses the term here, “unrighteous” doesn't mean morally depraved and evil, but that all people are unfaithful to the covenant God made Abraham and Moses – they are putting their trust in something other than God, which is idolatry.

In spite of our unrighteousness, says Paul, God is righteous. God is faithful and this faithfulness to the relationship with humanity is seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The proper human response to God's initiative is simply faith – not faith as intellectual assent to a set of doctrines, but faith as trust in God's promise.

Then comes the statement on the cover of the bulletin today: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith (trust), we can be confident we will go to heaven when we die.”

No, of course it doesn't say that. Paul says, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul here makes an important tactical shift. Instead of continuing to speak of Jews and Gentiles, he here speaks of “we.” We, both Jew and Gentile together, have peace with God. We, both Jew and Gentile together can be confident that God is faithful to the covenant promises and our relationship is restored – both our broken relationship with God and the broken relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Of this relationship between Jews and Gentiles he says, “we have now received reconciliation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What does this “peace with God”, this “salvation” look like? You'll have to come back next week for the next exciting episode.