

**Series:** Seek

**Title:** Gospel

**Text:** Romans 2:7, 8; 3:11

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The word “gospel” is one of the most important words in the Christian religion. Because it is not used much outside of the faith, some do not have a basic understanding of its meaning. The English term is actually a transliteration of a Greek word that was used in the first-century world. That Greek word was a compound word. It was comprised of two terms that literally meant “good message.” As a result, when we speak of “the gospel,” we are talking about the “good message” or “good news” of Jesus Christ.

Paul gave a straightforward definition of the gospel in one of his letters to the church at Corinth. In defending the core tenets of the Christian message, he said, “...I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Plain and simple, the gospel message is the good news that God provided salvation for sinners through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Concerning the gospel, one has said, “Our worst and God's best met on a battlefield called Calvary. God won! Jesus' victory there is God's Good News to those who will receive it.”<sup>1</sup>

Our study of the word “seek” in Scripture brings us to the topic of the gospel. Interestingly, Paul used the word a few times in the book of Romans to speak of Christ’s good news. By analyzing his use of the term in a few different passages, we learn of three foundational gospel realities — sin, wrath, and eternal life.

### **REALITY #1: SIN (ROMANS 3:11)**

In Romans 3:11, Paul said, “There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.” The apostle’s words came right on the heels of him saying, “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:11). In the context of the third chapter of Romans, it was Paul’s aim to convince his readers of the universal nature of sin. Some of his Jewish readers were deceived. Because of their cultural and religious upbringing, they believed they were morally superior to Gentile and pagan people. In their self-righteousness, they didn’t see their need for Jesus.

One of Paul’s purposes in writing his letter to the Romans was to impress upon their souls and minds the realities of sin. He was well aware of Jesus’ gospel preaching. He knew that Jesus summoned people to turn from sin. When Jesus preached, He proclaimed, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

Sin has often been defined as the act of missing God’s mark. Some would say the nature of sin was drawn from the world of archery. When a marksman missed a

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Sandra D. *Hurt People Hurt People: Hope And Healing For Yourself And Your Relationships*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery Publishing House, 2001), 203-204.

target, it was said that he erred or “sinned.” Such gives a fitting picture of what is involved with sin. Since the beginning of time, God has had a Law and a standard for His created beings. At the very outset of human history, the first humans rebelled against God’s Law (Genesis 2:17; 3:1-7). Because of their first sin, sinfulness spread to all of humanity. All have missed the mark of God’s Law. Like errant arrows that fly past an intended target, men and women consistently stray from God’s standard of moral uprightness.

All are inherently sinful. Later in his letter to the Romans, Paul said, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). King Solomon once asked, “Who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am cleansed from my sin?’” (Proverbs 20:9). Throughout the ages, the appropriate answer to Solomon’s rhetorical question is “No one!” There is not a person who has ever lived who can stake claim to moral perfection. All have fallen short of God’s standard of perfection. None can live in a way that matches His character.

The great Christian thinkers of bygone generations made much of these truths. The reformer John Calvin once said, “There is a world of vices hidden in the soul of man.”<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah Burroughs, a puritan, proclaimed, “We are not empty pitchers in respect of good, but we are like pitchers filled with poison.”<sup>3</sup> Sin is a condition that is endemic to all of humanity. All are stained and all fall short of God’s holiness.

The saddest thing about sin is the fact that it separates man from God. The Bible says, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death spread to all people, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). The death in view is spiritual death — alienation from God. J.C. Ryle once said, “Sin is a vast mountain between man and God.”<sup>4</sup> An awareness of such things is foundational to the gospel message. Without an awareness of sin, one is unlikely to see his or her need for salvation. Additionally, if one does not experience a conviction of sin, one cannot be saved.

## **REALITY #2: WRATH (ROMANS 2:8)**

Romans 2:8 is another passage that uses the word “seek” in reference to the gospel. In the verse, Paul said, “...but wrath and anger to those who are self-seeking and disobey the truth while obeying unrighteousness” (Romans 2:8). Paul’s words were uttered in reference to self-righteous religious people who sinfully judged others (Romans 2:1-5). Such individuals sought to obtain righteousness through man-centered forms of religion. They believed they were morally superior than those who didn’t follow their religious rules and rituals. Instead of trusting in Christ, they trusted in creeds, customs, culture, and manmade codes of conduct. Paul wanted his readers to know that such a gospel-less form of religion would surely lead to judgment.

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, John. *A Little Book on the Christian Life*. (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2017), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Burroughs, Jeremiah. *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 89.

<sup>4</sup> Ryle, J.C.. *Practical Religion*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 22.

## “Wrath and Anger”

Paul used two words in Romans 2:8 to speak of the judgment that was coming on His self-righteous readers. The first — “wrath” — may seem like a strong word. The Greek of the New Testament contained the word *orgē*. The word was one that referred to “anger as a state of mind.” The second word Paul used— anger (*thumós*) — spoke of an outburst of anger.<sup>5</sup> Coupled together in our text, the terms were intended to depict the intense wrath God has reserved for the sins of humanity. God vehemently hates sin because it hijacked humanity from its original intent.

The word *orgē* is used in Hebrews 3:11 to speak of God’s anger toward the Israelite’s unbelief during their time in the wilderness. Though He had promised to give them an inheritance in Canaan, they didn’t believe His promises. Grippled by fear, they refused to go up into the Promised Land and conquer it. The Lord exhibited wrath toward their sin by sending judgment. The people were prohibited from entering the Promised Land. They would die in the wilderness. Only their children would get to enjoy God’s promised inheritance. In Hebrews 3:11, the Lord is quoted as saying, “So I swore in my *anger*, ‘They will not enter my rest.’”

The Hebrews’ experience in Canaan teaches us a couple of important lessons about the wrath of God. First, it reveals that faith is the means of escaping God’s wrath. The Israelites’ failure rested in their lack of belief in the promises of God. Today, God has given us great promises via His gospel. By believing and trusting in such promises, we escape the wrath that will one day be poured out on humanity’s sin. Peter said, “By these he has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire” (2 Peter 1:4).

Second, the Israelites’ lack of faith in the wilderness reveals the prominence of “rest” in the experience of God’s people. In the economy of God, such rest is the opposite of wrath. The author of Hebrews used the concept of the Israelites’ rest in the Promised Land as a metaphor for the rest believers receive through the gospel. He said, “For we who have believed enter the *rest*...” (Hebrews 4:4). Via Christ, we have the opportunity to escape all of the wrath God has toward sin. By trusting in His work on the cross, our souls experience a state of spiritual rest. We no longer have to be tormented by guilt, shame, and the penalty of sin. In addition, we await a day in which we will experience full rest in the New Heaven and the New Earth (Revelation 21:1-4).

Interestingly the word for “anger” is used extensively in the book of Revelation. When it appears in that book, it does so in reference to the Lord’s end-of-the-world judgment on sin (Revelation 14:8, 10, 19; 16:19; 18:3). In Revelation 19:15, John depicted Jesus returning to annihilate sin and sinners from the Earth. He employed Paul’s word for “anger” in Romans 2:8, saying, “A sharp sword came from his mouth, so that he might strike the nations with it. He will rule them with an iron rod. He will also trample the winepress of the *fierce anger* of God, the Almighty.”

When people speak about Jesus nowadays, “fierce anger” aren’t terms that are used often. Most prefer to think of His more loving attributes. Indeed, Jesus is proof of God’s great love for His people (John 15:13); however, one should never highlight the love of God at the expense of the justice of God. Yes, anger often leads to sinful

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<sup>5</sup> Zodiates, 1055.

behavior for humans (Ephesians 4:26), but God exercises His anger in a perfect and holy way (Psalm 7:11). One day, He will perfectly and fully empty out all of the wrath He has toward sin on Satan and sinners (Revelation 20:10-15). In doing so, He will return the Earth and the human condition to His original intent. The New Earth and its residents will then bask in the righteousness and truth of the Lord forever (Revelation 22:1-5).

### **“Disobey the Truth”**

It’s interesting to note the reason for the “wrath and anger” of God in Romans 2:8. Paul indicated that such judgment from God would come on those who were “self-seeking,” who disobeyed “the truth while obeying unrighteousness.” From a cursory reading of those words, it may seem like Paul endorsed some sort of works-centered religion. Isn’t believing in Christ the means of salvation? How could Paul claim that wrath was coming on people because of their disobedience?

It is important to note that Paul was dealing with self-righteous people who boasted of obedience to religious laws. Their problem was that they had a man-centered religion based on manmade customs and traditions. By following ascribed rules, they checked religious boxes and congratulated themselves for their supposed righteous behavior.

Paul wanted such people to know that they needed a righteousness that far exceeded any righteousness man could produce. They needed the righteousness of God. In their self-righteous religion, Paul’s subjects engaged in sinfully judgmental behavior (Romans 2:1-5). As a result, they themselves were guilty of violating God’s Law (Exodus 20:13, 17; Matthew 5:21-26; 22:37-40). Their lack of Christian righteousness on one hand, coupled with their guilt concerning unrighteous behavior on another hand, ensured that they would experience the wrath and judgment of God.

Some may think it strange that Paul would depict his readers’ unrighteous behavior as a source of judgment. Perhaps our modern decision-based approach to conversion in the Western world has blinded us to the need for real faith that results in real spiritual fruit. In His preaching, Jesus said:

You’ll recognize them by their fruit. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can’t produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So you’ll recognize them by their fruit (Matthew 7:16-20).

An unrighteous lifestyle is a hallmark of those who don’t really know Christ. In addition, Christ is the only way for one to obtain a true righteousness that comes from God. Escape from the “wrath and anger” that God has toward sin can’t be gained from manmade religion. One must trust and believe in Christ. Once one is born again by Christ, he or she will naturally produce the true fruit of righteousness that God desires (John 15:4-5; Galatians 5:22). Such fruit will give evidence of true conversion, the type of conversion that guarantees one will escape the wrath that is to come.

### **Responding to Wrath**

There are two responses humans should have to the “wrath and anger” of God. First, if one has never been saved, one should place his or her faith in Christ. Only in Jesus can one find deliverance from sin and its horrific consequences. The believer is not subject to the horrible terror that will fall on sinners (1 Thessalonians 5:9). Instead, he or she will only experience the bliss of the Eternal State.

Second, if one has been saved, one should rejoice and look forward to the day of God’s wrath. In the New Heaven and the New Earth, there will no longer be any sin, suffering, corruption, confusion, pain, problems, tragedies, or temptations. Seen in this way, the “wrath and anger” of God are positive things that will bring about positive results. God’s judgment is the conduit through which humanity will be returned to God’s original intent for humankind. It is the vehicle by which God’s people will be introduced to Paradise. God has a mission for restoring the Earth to Garden-of-Eden-like conditions. If it wasn’t for the “wrath and anger” He will exercise through His Son (Revelation 19:11-15), such things would never be possible.

### **REALITY #3: ETERNAL LIFE (ROMANS 2:7)**

In Romans 2:7, we find another use of the word “seek” in reference to the gospel. In that verse, Paul said, “...eternal life to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality.” The apostle’s words highlight the great promise of the gospel. Because of Christ, God’s people have release from sin’s penalty. They are assured they will never experience the eternal death sin deserves. Paul spoke of such things later in Romans, saying, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). In His famous conversation with a man named Nicodemus, Jesus highlighted this aspect of salvation, saying, “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

### **What is Eternal Life?**

Paul’s words in Romans 2:7 bring us to a consideration of the exact nature of eternal life. The apostle revealed that “eternal life” is given “to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality,” but what’s involved in such life? That’s a good question. In the original language of the New Testament, Paul used two words to speak of “eternal life.” One was the common word for “life” in the ancient world. It was the word from which we get our word “zoo.” In Romans 2:7, it was modified by a word that meant “without beginning or end.”

Is it correct to say Christians gain a life “without beginning or end” through Christ? I would say no. God is the only one who possesses true eternal life. He is the only one without beginning or end. Theologians readily point out that there is only one Eternal and self-existent being in the universe. That being is the Lord, Yahweh.

Every other being who has ever lived is temporal. Each has a beginning point. God alone is the uncaused cause of all other beings. As a result, one should not view Paul’s mention of “eternal life” in Romans 2:7 as meaning that believers have “no beginning or no end.” Such an interpretation leads one to faulty conclusions about both the nature of humanity and the nature of Christian salvation.

To get a better idea of what’s involved in such “eternal life,” it helps to look at some of Jesus’ words in John. In praying on behalf of His people, our Lord said, “This

is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent—Jesus Christ” (John 17:3). Notice that our Lord provided what we could call a “textbook definition” of eternal life. If you were to ask the average believer today to define eternal life, the most popular answer would likely be something like, “Eternal life means to live forever.”

As we’ve already seen, no mere mortal enjoys literal eternal life. No human being has the ability to live forever. Each is temporal and finite. Only God is eternal.

So what did Paul mean when he spoke of believers obtaining “eternal life” in Romans 2:7? Well, his words should be interpreted in light of Jesus’ textbook definition of eternal life. For Jesus, such life was all about knowing “the only true God, and the one” God “sent — Jesus Christ.” Seen in this way, eternal life isn’t so much concerned with a *timeframe* of life. Instead, it is concerned with a *type* of life. Stated another way, eternal life isn’t about a duration of life; it is about a disposition in life — a life marked by the knowledge of God and His Son Jesus Christ.

Paul’s language in Romans 2:7 reveals these things to be true. Remember from that the word “eternal” modified the word “life” in Paul’s writing. Thus, “eternal” functioned as an adjective. This reveals that Paul regarded “eternal life” as a life marked by “eternity.” We know that the Lord is the one who “inhabits eternity” (Isaiah 57:15), so we could say “eternal life” is “life marked by the Eternal One — the Lord!”

This is what it means to have eternal life — one has a relationship with the Eternal God. It is precisely at this point that some of Paul’s readers were deficient. Many were seeking to establish their own righteousness through manmade rules and religion. Paul wanted them to know that they needed something different, something more. They needed the forgiveness of sin and the accredited righteousness that came through faith in Christ (Romans 5:17). They needed a relationship with the Eternal God through God’s Son!

### **Perseverance of the Saints**

Paul’s words in Romans 2:7 cause consternation for some because of his reference to “persistence in doing good.” A surface reading of the text may make some think that the apostle espoused a works-oriented salvation. Did Paul believe one needed to persist in doing good in order to have guarantee of eternal life? John Calvin commented on this apparent difficulty in his commentary on Romans 2:7, saying, “It has appeared to some difficult to reconcile this language with the free salvation which the gospel offers.”<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that Paul did not espouse a works-based salvation. If we use what has been called “the analogy of faith” and compare Paul’s words to other portions of Scripture, we will find that there is no way Paul meant to encourage persistence in good works as a way of earning salvation. In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul flatly said, “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

So what did Paul mean when he said “persistence in doing good” would lead to eternal life? By considering his words in light of the rest of Scripture, the meaning

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<sup>6</sup> Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 90.

becomes more clear. Scripture clearly presents good works as the natural result of true salvation. Yes, salvation is not of works, but salvation will be evidenced by such works. Right after declaring that salvation is “not from works, so that no one can boast” in Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul said “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

Good works are not a requirement for salvation, but they are the result of salvation. James emphasized such truth when he said, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). One can boast of faith all they want; however, if there is no transformation in the way one lives (2 Corinthians 5:17), it is doubtful one has truly been saved. Charles Spurgeon once proclaimed, “If you are Christ’s disciples you will bring forth the fruits of holiness, and if you are God’s children you will be like your Father. Godliness breeds God-likeness. The fear of God leads to imitation of God, and where this is not so, the root of the matter is lacking.”<sup>7</sup>

All of these things lead us to Paul’s point in speaking of “persistence in doing good.” The apostle highlighted a doctrine that is sometimes called “the perseverance of the saints.” The doctrine proclaims that the truly saved who believe in Christ will be kept secure in their salvation by the power of God. As one has said, “their salvation will not be lost.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus taught such things when He said, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28).

Paul’s words in Romans 2:7 reveal to us the true nature of Christian salvation. By God’s grace, God’s children have an otherworldly experience of life. Through Christ, they have a relationship with the Eternal God. Thus, they enjoy a life marked by the presence of the Eternal One throughout their pilgrimage on Earth. Persistence in good works is proof that they have been truly saved. They have promise of experiencing such life forever and ever. No one and no thing can rob them of the life God gives.

## **Conclusion**

The gospel is integral to the Christian religion. It is the good news concerning Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. It tells of the way Christ performed a work that provides forgiveness for the sins of His people. In using the word “seek” in the book of Romans, Paul highlighted three pivotal truths in the gospel message — sin, wrath, and eternal life. By understanding these truths, we can have a greater awareness of what’s involved with knowing God via His good news.

Do you know God? Have you understood and embraced the gospel message? Have you turned from sin and embraced Jesus as Savior? If so, are you living in light of gospel truth? Are you enjoying eternal life? Know that the Christian life isn’t primarily about rules, rituals, and religion. It involves a life lived in relationship with the

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<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon, C.H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: 1880*, 26. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 2005), 147.

<sup>8</sup> McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 207.

living God through the work of His Son, Jesus. The act of seeking God is built on the knowledge of such things.