

## Prayer

Almighty God, Your faithfulness has been shown through the lives of countless of Your servants who have born testimony to You over centuries. May we be worthy of being counted amongst them, and empowered by Your Holy Spirit, may we also be a good example of those who live a life of love and compassion towards all those we meet. You died so that we might be set free, and we owe our lives to You. Thank You, Almighty God: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*If you are doing any paperwork today, try submitting this paperwork to the Lord. Many people find paperwork difficult, so why not try asking for the Lord's help? He can help us get things in perspective so that we can deal with things properly.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian who live under oppression:** *Pray for those who live in Christian countries, where one form of the church oppresses the other.*
- *Pray about the subject of nuclear arms, and pray for those who make them as well as those who deploy them and have authority over them*
- *Give thanks to God for the fellowship of Christians of which you are a part, and all other Christians who live near to you*

## Meditation

Peace is knowing that you are special and loved;  
Loved so much that you do not have to question it.

Security is being able to do what you believe to be right,  
And not feeling ashamed before anyone else about it.

Health is feeling good about yourself, realistically,  
So no illness or disease can ever break your spirit.

Hope is being able to look contentedly into your future,  
For it is guaranteed for you by dependable promises.

Confidence is being able to get on with things unhindered,  
Because you know the advice you have been given is good.

Trust is knowing for sure that you are protected and safe,  
Certain that you know where to get help in difficult times.

Anyone may find some of these things, from time to time;  
But they are always to be found in Jesus Christ our Lord.

---

## Bible passage - Romans 12:1,2

<sup>1</sup> I therefore appeal to you, friends, through the mercies of God, dedicate your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God; this is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be shaped by this present age, but be transformed by the renewal of the mind so that you may discern the will of God; what is good, acceptable and perfect.

---

# Bible Study

## Review

This is a truly wonderful passage of Scripture, and I have selected only these two verses because of their great importance for Christian faith and practice. At this point in his letter, Paul has completed his description of God's plan for the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ (Romans 1-8), and has finished his lengthy deliberation about the place of the Jewish people in the providence of God (Romans 9 to 11). So he now describes how a Christian should live in the light of the 'Good News' he has just described.

It is something of a relief to arrive at a place in Romans where it offers advice about how to be a disciple rather than just make further points about the Gospel! The first half of Romans, despite its great highlights, is indeed a lengthy 'theological' description of the Gospel! Our reading today is immensely important, and may be summed up by saying that the only proper response to the Gospel is that of complete commitment. Worship involves total allegiance and also the '*renewal of the mind*' (12:2) so God's will may be known and done. This is an important message that explains very simply the consequences of discipleship, which are radical; the whole of life is affected by the Gospel, not just the 'religious bit'!

Paul wrote like this because of the need for direction and teaching in the early church. There were many different religions within the Roman Empire and each was known by its characteristic beliefs and practices. The Jewish people were known as 'People of the Law' because of their rigorous legalism based on the laws of Moses and their many guidelines for everyday living. Traditional Roman citizens were identified by their loyalty to the Emperor, and some expressed this by presenting 'drink offerings' or pouring out 'libations' to him in shrines, set up by those who believed that he was a god. A vast array of other religions were based on various philosophical and superstitious beliefs, each with its distinctive contribution to the world of the Roman Empire.

It was only right, therefore, that after Paul had explained the nature of Christian faith, he should go on to describe next how to live it. The first bold notion presented by Paul is the idea that a Christian should be dedicated to God not just through the sacrifice of death, but through a 'living sacrifice' of dedicated service. Now in the days of the Roman Empire, sacrifices involving the slaughtering of animals were common both in Judaism and in many other religions, but Christianity was to be different; a faith of life, not death! Christ had already died on the Cross, and His death was a sufficient sacrifice for the sins of all people, so no more death was required! .

All this sounds fascinating, but as this passage makes plain, to be a 'living sacrifice' is not just to enjoy a new spiritual relationship with God, it requires some effort. Paul asks Christians to 'dedicate' themselves to God. The idea sounds rather abstract, but what he means is this; one who has believed in Jesus and been saved needs to put personal commitment into a relationship with God, for dedication and commitment means little unless it involves 'doing things'. We should always remember that the word 'worship' in the New Testament does not describe something done in church on Sundays. It means 'doing things' that please God and honour Him, in thanks for His love

This passage only begins to reveal what a Christian life might look like, but in verse 2, Paul points us in the right direction. The believer must be open to the 'renewal of the mind' by the power of the Spirit, so that God's will may be known; without this, how can anyone know what is right? This radical approach to the new life is profoundly liberating. On the one hand, the life and faith of a Christian is tied to God through Christ and different from anything found in the world. On the other hand, such a pathway enables a Christian to find God's way in the midst of all life's problems as they arise. Christians do not 'conform to the present age' (12:2), they have access to the Spirit's guidance for whatever happens in life.

These two verses point to much more to come!

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- A 'living sacrifice'
- 'Spiritual worship'
- The renewal of the mind
- Some examples of the renewal of the mind

### Going Deeper

These two verses of Romans 12 are very important, and we will study them further, verse by verse. Their words seem straightforward, but there are some interesting surprises. The word for 'spiritual' in verse 1, for example, also means 'rational'! It sounds odd, but there is an important explanation of this. Each word in verse 2 also contributes immeasurably to our understanding of what it must mean to be in touch with the 'will of God'. All this is very important.

### ***A 'living sacrifice'***

You will remember that in the section of this letter previous to this, Paul explained that the people of Israel who rejected their Messiah would one day be brought back into the Kingdom by the mercies of God. Paul continued this theme of the mercies of God into today's passage, making this the basis of his appeal to Christian living. The Christian was saved by the mercies of God through Jesus Christ, and the Jew would one day find the Covenant promises fulfilled by those same mercies, so they were also the basis upon which Christian life was to be built.

Previous to the death of Jesus, sacrifices were brought to the Temple in Jerusalem, and were offered to God in atonement for the sins of the people. Animals used for this ritual sacrifice were slaughtered according to the ritual laws of Moses found in the Old Testament. It was a powerful religious imagery in which life was given up so that other lives might be saved. Now, said Paul, with Jesus having given Himself up as a sacrifice for us, Christians should give themselves back to God, not to die, but to live for Him as a 'living sacrifice'. The whole idea of sacrifice is difficult for us today, because of our dislike of what it means in the Old Testament, but we cannot simply dismiss the idea. It is quite common for the word 'sacrifice' to be used today to mean 'complete giving', or at least the idea that something has to be given up if something else is to happen. For example, we talk of sacrificing time we might spend on our own needs, in order to help others. The Old Testament can help us learn more about sacrifice, but the idea is clear enough even now; a Christian is one who is prepared to give themselves completely to God. Whatever happens beyond this is not the point; it is the necessary starting point of all Christian discipleship.

### ***'Spiritual worship'***

What is really interesting is the phrase Paul uses at the end of the verse, 'this is your spiritual worship'. Worship is what we offer God because He is our Creator and Redeemer, and consists of words and actions which demonstrate our allegiance to Him, and this idea fits well with what Paul says here. At first glance, so does the word 'spiritual', but the Greek word used by Paul is 'logikos', which has the meaning of either 'spiritual' or 'rational'. This is strange, for surely these two ideas are radically different from each other! How can they mean the same thing in Greek?

Simply put, the word 'logikos' was the Greek word for that which differentiated people from animals. The ancient Greeks, as other ancient people, knew very well that animals could think, feel, express themselves and feel pain, but they did not believe they had that consciousness of self which enabled them to express themselves in rational thinking, scientifically, creatively, philosophically, or, crucially, spiritually. The ancients considered it a natural function of people to be religious, and therefore 'spiritual', so they included this in their understanding of what it meant to be human (one is tempted to think they had a better grasp of these things than people today!) The word 'logikos' therefore expressed all these essentially 'human' faculties; so when Paul used it in this text, he did so to emphasise that this worship was not performed by proxy through animals, but by people, in touch with the living God!

We must be careful with words like this in Scripture, for it would therefore be quite wrong of us to read the word 'spiritual' in this translation and imagine that it meant something like 'not physical', for example.

### ***The renewal of the mind (12:2)***

At the beginning of verse 2, Paul appealed for the emerging Christian communities to have nothing to do with the ways of the world developing all around them, but to be 'transformed by the renewal of the mind'. Paul was not afraid to talk openly about the importance of the mind, though many Christians today are sceptical about what they call 'head knowledge'. Paul, however, knew that what people did was a matter of what they knew, and in this case, he wanted people to know the 'will of God' for how they should conduct themselves in everyday life.

What he was saying was that the mind of a Christian should be renewed by the Spirit of God so that it would then be focussed on God and the things of God, rather than the things of the world. It is fairly certain that Paul would have assumed that knowing Scripture and reading it regularly would be part of what it meant to know the things of God. However, because Paul and the people of his day did not have a 'New Testament', the Scriptures had to be read in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This was the new factor in everything by which the human mind would be renewed.

### ***Some examples of the renewal of the mind***

An example of what Paul could have meant would be this. We can all read the 'wisdom' books of the Old Testament such as the book of Proverbs. Some of this book consists of poems about right and wrong, and most of it is short sayings again about what is right and wrong. If you read this book, you have a clear picture of the teaching of ancient Israel about right and wrong, although many of the sayings are not clear because times have changed radically since they were written. However, if you were to read this book both knowing Jesus and being guided by the Holy Spirit, then the Holy Spirit can reveal to us how to apply some of these sometimes mysterious sayings; and also how they connect with the teaching of Jesus. Similar benefits can be found in reading the Psalms, and many other parts of Scripture.

Given that the aim of being renewed in one's mind is to know 'what is good, acceptable and perfect' in God's sight, a good knowledge of Scripture could well be the basis of what Paul had in mind. Knowing the difference between right and wrong, and knowing what God would have us do is called 'discernment', and this great gift is what all Christians need in order to live a godly life. Without it, we either simply compromise with what the world around us does, or simply do not know what to do. From this Scripture, the solution to this is clear. Get to know the Scriptures and read them in the light of your faith, asking the Holy Spirit to be your guide. Your mind will be renewed and you will find that much of the Old Testament (and now, the New Testament) speaks clearly about what is right and wrong before God. This will be your guide in deciding how to live your life as a Christian in today's ever changing world.

## Application

Many Christians today feel uncertain about what constitutes Christian living in today's world, and how to express faith within a Christian community. Admittedly, there are many difficulties to face today; the world in which we live is a rapidly changing world with many substantial challenges, and it is easy to be drawn into them quickly and without thinking. Also, the church is in crisis in many places, because of loss of numbers and uncertainty about the future. In the midst of this, many individuals are confused and uncertain about their faith. These two sentences in Romans are a good place to start in the quest to rectify such concerns. The solutions will be found by total allegiance to Christ and a life lived exclusively for and to God, and questions about what God wants of us can be answered by minds that are in tune with His Word from Scripture, within the preached word and from private devotion, at least.

I finish with a concern. Too often, I have seen Christian people of various ages compromise their faith by living in ways that are completely at odds with what the Bible says is right and wrong in life. Casual sexual relationships fly in the face of God's amazing plan for men and women to find their fulfilment in exclusive relationships, for example. Also, many people speak as if their use of language did not matter, expressing thoughts and feelings in ways that are degrading to others and also to Jesus, yet still claim to be good Christians; but the fact is that bad language compromises their witness. A mind that is renewed and directed exclusively towards God is a mind that will find the right answers to life's rights and wrongs, and will discover the constant challenge of the Holy Spirit to question natural desires and means of living. Our target must be the will of God, not self expression or personal gratification and fulfilment; and when people discover the exciting way that God can change them, then the church will be reborn.

---

## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. How do you offer yourself as a 'living sacrifice' to God? Is this done within worship or within everyday life?
2. In what ways are Christians easily shaped by the present age, rather than the influence of Jesus Christ within them?
3. How should the Christian Church assist the transformation of people's minds?

### **Personal comments by author**

*This passage of scripture is incredibly powerful and has a great deal to say to each of us; it is one of those passages of scripture that is simple and says a great deal in a few words, yet takes a lifetime to appreciate and unpack. Certainly, I feel that I have not begun to explore the full range of what it means for me to be a 'living sacrifice', for example, and I know that the Lord is having to renew my mind constantly. There is no doubt that the words are powerfully helpful.*

## ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

- *This passage may well challenge you in a number of different ways; but bear in mind that the aim of Paul's words is the transformation of the soul so that it may discern right and wrong. Ask the question; 'where do I fall short?', and go from there! If you are on the right track, the Holy Spirit will guide you!*
  - *Pray for any people you know who find it hard to change, and are not sure what they can do to live as God wants them. Pray God's blessing on them.*
- 

## **Final Prayer**

Lord God, speak into our hearts the truth of Jesus' great work for us on the Cross, and where words are not enough, enlighten us by Your Spirit. Forgive us if we have misunderstood the mysteries of salvation, and lead us into all truth as we read about the death of Jesus, AMEN

---