SEVERAL TIMES THE APOSTLE PAUL cited paradoxes to communicate profound biblical truths. He wrote about seeing unseen things, conquering by yielding, finding rest under a yoke, being free yet a slave, reigning by serving, being made great by becoming small, being exalted by being humble, becoming wise by being fools for Christ, triumphing through defeat, and living by dying. This article focuses on three of these: the weak and the strong (2 Cor. 12:7–10), human wisdom and the foolishness of the gospel (1 Cor. 1:17–25), and slaves and freedmen (Rom. 6:15–23).

Paul's intention was not to present irreconcilable, antithetical positions, but to use a literary device to accentuate theological truths that could best be expressed through paradoxical statements. When two truths, such as a weak person who is weak and a strong person who is strong, are presented as a paradox ("when I am weak then I am strong"), the result is a third truth that overrides the first and second truths. This third truth is a divine truth that is significant for either doctrine or application or both. However, nonbelievers cannot grasp this third truth. "The unbeliever, being blind to spiritual things because his ways are controlled by

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Satan (Eph 2:2), looks on a Scriptural paradox in frustrated or de­ri­sive bewilderment."² Yet for believers Paul's paradoxes are life­changing principles to be applied by faith.

DEFINITIONS

A paradox is "a set of claims which taken in conjunction appears to be logically inconsistent."³ It is a "seeming contradiction based on the tension between two apparently opposite facts, tenets, or situa­tions."⁴ A paradox is "simply a seeming contradiction"⁵ that is "(1) an assertion which is self­contradictory, or (2) two or more asser­tions which are mutually contradictory, or (3) an assertion which contradicts some very commonly held position on the matter in question."⁶ Therefore "the term paradox refers to an unusual and apparently self­contradictory rhetorical statement or concept that departs dramatically from accepted opinion."⁷ Keller discusses the nature of paradox as a literary tool.

A paradox is an apparent or real logical opposition of words, statements, or propositions which point the way to an inherent mean­ing deeper than is directly articulated. In the event that the words, statements, or propositions are not opposites, the particular paradox may have a hidden truth in one experience with different applications, for example, "When I am weak, then I am strong." The distinction here is between being physically weak in oneself and spiritually strong in God. The "inherent meaning" of paradox needs to be sought on different levels of being and in different relations.⁸

The Old Testament writers often employed paradoxes to de­scribe human experience with God (e.g., 1 Kings 8:27). Jesus also taught through paradoxes to communicate spiritual truths (e.g.,

⁵ Fowler, Winning and Losing, 16.
John 3–4). Therefore Paul's use of paradoxes is in line with the communicative tradition of the Scriptures. Keller identifies three reasons why a writer used paradoxes: (a) as a way of getting the attention of the reader or hearer, (b) as an indication of truth transcending the present level of human knowledge, and (c) as an illustration of the incapacity of human reason to grasp life's mysteries in relation to God. A paradox cannot exist without resting on the realities of each realm.

Pauline paradoxes are often situated on two platforms, the physical and the spiritual. For instance suffering is a fact of life. Believers and unbelievers alike suffer. Humanity generally considers suffering and sickness as weaknesses—“obstacles to personal identity or previously defined goals”—but God often considers suffering necessary for spiritual health and strength. However, pain, suffering, martyrdom, or asceticism are not to be sought out by Christians as means of gaining God’s favor.

The humanistic philosophy that views suffering, pain, disablement, and illness as a sign of sin or weakness—something to be avoided at all costs—is insidious and is entrenched in the dogma of the “prosperity gospel.” All pain is considered bad, and all absence of pain and suffering is viewed as good. Health and prosperity therefore are like “gods,” while illness and suffering are “demons” to be cast out. Paul, however, taught the opposite, namely, that spiritual strength is demonstrated by the way a believer deals with suffering and weakness. This strength in weakness and call to suffering is a paradox to nonbelievers or secularists who run from pain at all costs, or who consign all life to a fickle fate. So how are believers to see weakness as strength and suffering as blessing?

THE PARADOX OF THE WEAK AND THE STRONG (2 COR. 12:7–10)

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from ex-

9 Ibid., 39–46.
10 Fowler, Winning by Losing, 107.
11 This term represents a false philosophy that insists on physical and material prosperity as evidence of being a Christian or at least a mature believer in proper relationship with Christ, and the lack of prosperity as a sign of sinfulness and immaturity.
12 Fatalism is “the doctrine that all events are predetermined by fate and are therefore unalterable by men” (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992], 664). This view is extremely common in developing countries.
alting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

The epistles of 1 and 2 Corinthians indicate that there was an element in the church that sought to discredit Paul’s ministry and authority. These opponents also claimed that true apostles did not suffer, but prospered. The opposition of which Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 10–13 was apparently of Jewish origin and involved men who claimed to be apostles, but who preached a false gospel (11:4), thereby enslaving their followers (v. 20). These chapters were written in part to expose the false credentials of these deceitful workers and to defend Paul’s God-given authority and ministry as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

To demonstrate his apostolic credentials Paul was forced to boast about his knowledge, integrity, accomplishments, sufferings, visions, and miracles (11:1—12:13). The emphasis in this section is on his sufferings in order to show that a true apostle is not a person of prosperity and power, but one whose suffering is not only for the cause of Christ but also for the purpose of helping him remain humble and dependent on the Lord (12:7). Paul’s response to the criticism of the false teachers was startling. It is as if he was saying, “It is my weaknesses—so obvious and irritating to you—which actually gave the power of God an opportunity to do its work.”

God was not interested in producing so-called spiritual giants who seem to be superpowerful. Paul claimed that weakness is the setting whereby God, not the individual, gets the credit.

The Lord told Ananias, “I will show him [Paul] how much he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). In 2 Corinthians 11–12 Paul listed some of the suffering he endured. He began his list of qualifications for true apostleship and servant leadership by stating that he was not a skillful orator (11:6). He was dependent on those who supported him (vv. 7–9), and he admitted that he was considered a weak leader (v. 21). Paul then listed his many weaknesses and troubles. He worked hard for the sake of others (v. 23); he was imprisoned more than others (v. 23); he was beaten more often (v. 23); five times he received “thirty-nine lashes” from his

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14 Girard, My Weakness: His Strength, 137.
own countrymen, the Jews (v. 24); three times he was beaten with clubs (v. 25); he suffered the humiliation and agony of stoning (v. 25); he was shipwrecked three times (v. 25); he was constantly travelling and in danger (v. 26); he was driven from city after city because of hatred (v. 26); false brethren hated him and tried to destroy his ministry (v. 26); he suffered from overwork, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold, and exposure (v. 27); and he was constantly concerned with the growth and maturity of the churches (v. 28). Also he experienced unanswered prayer (12:8–9), insults (v. 10), distresses (v. 10), persecutions (v. 10), difficulties (v. 10), fear of disappointment and rejection (v. 20), fear of facing difficult situations like strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slander, gossip, arrogance, disturbances (v. 20), and the fear of humiliation, mourning, and the Corinthians’ refusal to respond to him and change their ways (v. 21). Paul also feared that he might become proud because of the special revelations that were given to him, especially those noted in 12:1–6. All this serves as the context for 12:7–10, the passage on the thorn and weakness.

THE THORN IN THE FLESH (2 COR. 12:7–8)

Lightfoot gives four common interpretations of the thorn: (a) a bodily ailment (Tertullian, Jerome, and Lightfoot); (b) opposition Paul encountered in Corinth (Chrysostom, Eusebius, Hilary, Augustine, Theodoret); (c) carnal temptations Paul faced (Aquinas, Béllarmine, Estius); (d) spiritual trials (Luther and a second view of Chrysostom’s).  

Most expositors believe this was some physical ailment Paul suffered. The thorn (σκόλοψ, which appears only here in the New Testament) was “a pointed stake” used to repulse attackers, or a thornlike splinter. Some armies used this word for the stakes on which they displayed the heads of their victims. Paul’s thorn or spearlike attack evidently referred to something that affected his well-being and ministry. This thorn or spear is further described as a “messenger [or angel] of Satan.” “This . . . has been understood to

signify that Paul is speaking of a person rather than a thing,”¹⁸ as suggested by the context.¹⁹ “The use of a term like thorn or nettle to refer to enemies was . . . a common idiom in Paul’s day.”²⁰

“MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT” (2 COR. 2:9)

Even though Paul’s request for the removal of the thorn was denied, Christ assured him that His grace and power were enough to give him strength to cope with the pain and weakness. The Lord gave him a specific answer: the thorn was necessary for keeping him from developing arrogance (stated twice in v. 7). “Christ assures Paul that the supply of His grace (cf. 13:13) for the carrying out of Paul’s ministry, and in particular for the bearing of the pain and buffeting of the σκόλοψ [‘thorn’], would never run dry. He needed nothing more than Christ’s grace. Having that, he had the strength to endure all things (cf. 1 Cor. 13:7) and to do all things to the glory of God (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31).”²¹

Philippians 4:13 also states the “grace-is-sufficient” principle: “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” The chiastic structure of 2 Corinthians 12:9a emphasizes the principle even more.²²

A. ἀρκεῖ (“sufficient”)
B. σοι (“for you”)
C. ἡ χάρις μου (“My grace”)
C/. ἡ γὰρ δύναμις (“for the power”)
B./ ἐν ταῖς ἀθένεια (“in weakness”)
A./ τελείται (“perfect or complete”)

This structure emphasizes Christ’s power and grace and Paul’s weakness, resulting in the completion of God’s purpose and will “for Christ’s sake” (v. 10a). “As Paul heard and now recounts this second affirmation of Christ, his primary thought would have been of Christ’s power reaching its zenith in his own weakness.”²³

¹⁸ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 447.
²⁰ Ibid., 303 n. 22 (italics his).
²¹ Murray J. Harris, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 862.
²² Ibid.
²³ Ibid., 863.
Christ's power and His grace are both gifts, not something Paul was able to produce in himself. The "weakness" Paul felt was from the onslaught of the thorn as he served as a bond-servant (δούλος) of Christ (Rom. 1:1). Paul saw himself as "impotent to render effective service to God without his empowering." It is "in the midst of weakness" that Christ's power reaches its plenitude; "weakness" is the sphere where his power is revealed. It is precisely when or whenever (όταν) Paul is weak that he experiences Christ's power [2 Cor. 12:10b]. We conclude that δοσθενεία ['weakness'] is both a prerequisite and a concomitant of Christ's power. His enabling strength cannot operate without a prior confession of weakness and need. If self-sufficiency is claimed, his power will be neither sought nor experienced. But if weakness is recognized, his power will be... granted. The point is clear: "The weaknesses which Paul welcomed were not self-induced: they were given him (v. 7), and given also with them was grace sufficient for him to triumph through a power not his own and to rejoice because Christ instead of self was being glorified." Christ's power is made "perfect" or "complete" in weakness, and a new understanding of "weakness" is given by the paradox: (human) weakness is (divine) strength. Paul endured weakness and spoke of "boasting" about weaknesses as necessary so that Christ's power would dwell (έπισκηνώση) in him.

PLEASURE IN WEAKNESSES (2 COR. 12:10)
In verse 10 Paul summed up what this paradox implies. He was well pleased with his weaknesses (infirmity, disease, sickness), insults (mistreatments), distresses (anguish, extreme affliction), persecution, and difficulties because they were "for Christ's sake." The sufferings and weaknesses of Paul were not of particular value in themselves. They were gifts given by Christ to the apostle for the sake of his ministry and the furtherance of the gospel. His suffering and pain resulted in God's power being manifest. The phrase ευδοκώ ("I take pleasure in" or "I delight in") is similar to glorying in Christ's resurrection power (Phil. 3:10). Not only do the weaknesses "provide occasions when Christ's power can rest upon him (v. 9a); they are borne as a consequence of serving Christ and for his glory." "This paradoxical principle, which lay at the center

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 864.
26 Hughes, Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians, 452.
27 Harris, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, 866–67.
of Paul’s life and ministry, is an explicitly and intensely personal application of v. 9b, ‘power reaches perfection in weakness.’ . . . When Paul acknowledged his weakness and expressed his dependence on Christ, he became simultaneously ‘powerful’ with Christ’s resurrection power.”

APPLICATIONS: WEAKNESS BECOMES STRENGTH

1. The paradox: God’s power reaches its summit and pinnacle in the believer’s weakness and helplessness (2 Cor. 12:9).

2. The believer’s weakness can become one of the strongest testimonies before an unbelieving world of God’s grace, because it reflects the suffering of Christ and allows Him to shine through that suffering (vv. 10–11).

3. The weakness of the believer in times of trial and suffering calls for dependence on God and not on self (v. 9a).

4. God uses weakness to teach that human accomplishments and human strength will one day be revealed as useless in comparison with accomplishments through divine enabling (vv. 9b–10).

5. Weakness demands boasting in Christ, not in self. Humility and not arrogance is the believer’s conduit to divine strength (vv. 6–7, 9b).

6. In the believer’s weakness God receives credit for any accomplishments. He alone receives glory (v. 7).

7. The body of Christ benefits from the suffering and weakness of its members, not by its human strength and material prosperity (v. 10b; cf. 1 Cor. 12:22–26 and Acts 5:40–42).

8. Pain reminds sufferers of their humanness and their need of God’s power (vv. 7–10).

THE PARADOX OF THE FOOLISHNESS OF THE GOSPEL (1 COR. 1:17–25)

Why is the task of communicating the gospel to a lost and dying world so difficult? Paul addressed this problem in 1 Corinthians

28 Ibid., 867.

29 Paul Brand and Philip Yancey discuss these issues fully in Fearfully and Wonderfully Made (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).
1:17–25. "There is broad agreement among exegetes that Paul is, in these verses, defending himself against the criticism of (some of) the Corinthians, while at the same time trying to address the factionalism within the community at Corinth. Paul hopes to achieve these two goals in one blow by correcting the Corinthians' understanding of 'wisdom'."30

The Corinthian church was not lacking in any way (vv. 5–9). The believers there had received the Word, and they were indwelt by the Spirit. Yet they sought to combine their understanding of the gospel with a dependence on human wisdom. This led to competing camps that swore allegiance to human leaders associated with the Corinthian church (vv. 10–16). Paul's understanding of his mission was that he must "preach the gospel," but he qualified his understanding of that mission by addressing a core value of the Corinthians, namely, wisdom.

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Cor. 1:17–20).

“No mere human, in his or her right mind or otherwise, would ever have dreamed up God’s scheme for redemption—through a crucified Messiah. It is too preposterous, too humiliating."31 Paul declared that his preaching of the gospel was not ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου ("in wisdom of speech"). If λόγου is taken as a descriptive genitive, the phrase would mean "a kind of wisdom that is characterized by rhetoric."32 The Corinthian cultural background for this phrase was probably the Greek philosophical tradition, more than the Hebrew wisdom tradition of the Old Testament. Therefore Paul was most likely referring to the "current philosophical environment, with its emphasis both on human understanding and rhetorical skill."33 The term "wisdom" probably described the basic assumptions that guided the Greek understanding of reality and existence.

32 Ibid., 64.
33 Ibid., 65.
Paul asserted that the basic assumptions of Greek philosophy, and the rhetorical formulations used to express them, were inadequate to communicate the truth of the gospel. Indeed “wisdom of speech” would empty the gospel of its power (v. 18). “As for the Greeks, who seek glory in speech and eloquence, they consider the divine plan of the incarnation to be foolishness. . . . [but] the incarnate Word is the power and wisdom of God.”34

Although there is a λόγος (“word”) that expresses the wisdom of the age and culture, there is also a λόγος (“a message”) that is considered foolishness according to human wisdom—“the λόγος ['word'] of the cross” (v. 18). The message of the cross is so contradictory to the wisdom of the world that it is regarded as pure foolishness. It simply does not make sense to “those who are perishing” because it violates their basic understanding of reality and thus seems to be nothing more than foolishness. Acts 17:17–20 illustrates the way a typical Greek thinker would understand the message of the gospel.

So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?” Others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean” (italics added).

The Athenians viewed Paul’s message as nothing more than babbling, a new and strange teaching.

Paul noted that those who remained enslaved to the assumptions of their basic philosophies of life were perishing (1 Cor. 1:18). But a different response to Paul’s message would lead to salvation. To this group the gospel was the source of power, the power to save. “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (v. 21).

The temptation to construct belief systems that deny the reality of God’s character and plan has been evident for centuries. All who challenge God’s wisdom—including Greek philosophers and Jewish theologians—ultimately end up expounding folly. Yet they do not realize it, for “professing to be wise, they became fools”

34 Cyril of Alexandria, quoted in Judith L. Kovacs, 1 Corinthians: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 25.
(Rom. 1:22). So the task of gospel proclamation—what the wisdom of the age deems foolish—was instituted by God’s own will. Only through that means can the message of salvation come, breaking through the arrogant wisdom constructed by human endeavors to make sense of the world.

Paul then wrote that “Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:22). “Thus ‘Jews demand miraculous signs.’ This reflects Jewish messianic expectations. . . . ‘Greeks look for wisdom.’ This, too, was a national characteristic. These then are the two basic idolatries: The demand for power and the insistence on wisdom,”35 explanations that made sense to human understanding. For the Jews God was a force, and for the Greeks God was an idea. Both “gods” were manipulated to serve the needs of the worshipper. In asking for signs the Jews were saying, in essence, “God, prove to us, as You have in the past, that You are real, and that You uphold Your covenant. Rescue us with Your strong hand.” Greeks on the other hand sought for explanations based on human wisdom. In contrast to the Jews, who at least knew to look to God for signs, Greeks were lost in their endless speculations and philosophical formulations, looking for “an unknown god” (Acts 17:23) to lead them to truth and ultimate reality.

No speech can explain the great things of God. Consider this: when I say, “[Christ] was crucified,” a Greek asks, “What kind of sense can this make? When he was being crucified and tested, he did not help himself. So, after this, how did he rise again and help others? If he had the power, he should have helped himself before his death.” This is what the Jews were saying (see Matt. 27:41-42). “How can the one who did not help himself help others? It does not make sense,” they say. This is quite right, for the cross is beyond reason, my friend, and it has an indescribable power.36

To these who sought for signs of power and evidence of wisdom Paul preached Christ crucified, which in itself was a challenge to both groups: a paradox. “One may have a Messiah, or one may have a crucifixion; but one may not have both—at least not from the perspective of merely human understanding. Messiah meant power, splendor, triumph; crucifixion meant weakness, humiliation, defeat.”37 From the Jewish perspective a crucified Messiah

37 Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 75 (italics his).
was nothing more than a scandal (σκάνδαλον). How could the Promised One of God be cursed? How could Almighty God die in weakness? From the Greek perspective, according to Tacitus, a crucified Messiah was “foolishness” (μωρία) and according to Pliny it was “a perverse, extravagant superstition.” So the message Paul proclaimed to a dying world was considered foolishness. Why? Because it contradicted the basic assumptions that Jewish and Greek culture followed in seeking to make sense of their world.

To those whom the Spirit gives understanding, the weak and defeated Messiah (Christ crucified) is in reality “the power of God,” and “the foolishness of God” (the Cross) is in reality “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24–25). “The Jewish expectation of signs is met by the kerygma of the cross . . . but this expectation is met in a way that paradoxically falls short of their expectation. The contradiction of the word about the cross over against human expectations can hardly be expressed more strongly than Paul does it here. The word about the cross shatters the Jewish expectations.”

This paradox of conflicting concepts is the greatest of all realities in the plan of God. First Corinthians 1–3 makes it clear that only through the work of the Holy Spirit can anyone understand the wisdom of the Cross. “It is the Spirit’s correction . . . which allows them to recognize that the Gospel, despite its difference from ‘worldly wisdom,’ presents a rationally coherent way of interpreting the world. It is the moral influence of the . . . Spirit which allows . . . the rational interpretive task of re-evaluating all of life and reality in light of the new framework provided by the Gospel.” Foolishness from the human vantage point becomes wisdom from the divine perspective. “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise” (3:18).

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38 Ibid., 76 n. 41.

39 Origen stated, “Consider how the power of the Lord has filled the world—that is, the sky, the earth, and what is under the earth—and how it has pierced the heaven itself and climbed to the very summit” (Kovacs, 1 Corinthians: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators, 23).


41 James M. Reese states, “A paradox results: Mortals are both flesh and blood, animated by a limited life principle with an unstable will, yet they are elevated into community of life with God’s own Spirit” (Biblical Theology Bulletin 9 [October 1979]: 162).

42 Scott, Implicit Epistemology in the Letters of Paul, 48.
APPLICATIONS: FOOLISHNESS BECOMES WISDOM

1. The paradox: The supposed weakness of God is in fact strength, and the supposed foolishness of God is in fact true wisdom; worldly wisdom is then foolishness and human power is in fact weakness (1 Cor. 1:26–31).

2. Human wisdom is corroborated by human agreement (v. 22), whereas divine wisdom is manifest in Jesus Christ and is substantiated by the Holy Spirit (vv. 18, 23).

3. The implementation of divine wisdom is acting and relying on the principles given in the Word of God about Christ. Human wisdom is man-centered, while divine wisdom is Christ-centered (vv. 23–24; cf. Phil. 2:5; Col. 2:2–3, 8–10; 1 Pet. 2:21).

4. The foolishness of God, the divine wisdom of the Cross, is in tune with God’s directives (“not many wise according to the flesh” are called [1 Cor. 1:26], but “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise” [v. 27]).

5. Human wisdom trusts in its own creation, while divine wisdom trusts in the power of God (2:5; cf. Rom. 1:25; 12:1–2).

6. Arrogance is basic to human wisdom, but divine wisdom rests in humility and admission of weakness (1 Cor. 1:25–29; cf. Phil. 2:3–11).

7. Human wisdom glories in self-accomplishment, but divine wisdom glories in Christ and God alone (1 Cor. 1:19, 29, 31; 2:1–2).

THE PARADOX OF THE SLAVE AND FREE (ROM. 6:15–23)

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the
wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The link between Romans 5 and 6 is the law's condemnation that gives a heightened awareness of sin, which is met with grace. In Romans 5 Paul encouraged the recipients of this epistle by reminding them that they had been justified by faith in Christ (vv. 1). In grace they had been moved from the status of sin and death as Adam's children, to salvation and life as children of God. Grace was increased where sin thrived and now grace reigned in their lives (vv. 20–21).

In chapters 6–8 Paul was "justifying the gospel" he had presented in chapters 1–5. He raised issues (or possible objections) related to the gospel of grace and answered them. He dealt with how righteousness is imparted to people through sanctification. Three aspects of sanctification are true of believers: (a) positional sanctification, in which all believers are set apart to God at redemption, (b) experiential sanctification, in which believers live a righteous life, and (c) final sanctification, when believers live forever in a resurrected body, free from sin.

Romans 6:1–10 is in the indicative mood and speaks of position in Christ. Believers are not to continue in sin; they are to know their position in Christ and live by it. The imperative mood prevalent in verses 11–14 challenges believers not to live in sin, but to live out their position in Christ in a lifestyle of honor. The contrast is seen here:

<table>
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<th>INDICATIVE MOOD (6:1–10)</th>
<th>IMPERATIVE MOOD (6:11–14)</th>
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<tr>
<td>The affirmation of what God has done for believers in Christ.</td>
<td>The exhortation to live out this new life.</td>
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<td>What God did for believers at salvation.</td>
<td>What believers are to do; how they are to live in grace.</td>
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<td>Past factual event of salvation and the secure status of positional sanctification.</td>
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<td>Salvation as a past event.</td>
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<td>Freedom from slavery to the sin nature.</td>
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<td>Believers have died in Christ.</td>
<td>Believers are alive with Christ.</td>
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The fact of the believers' position in Christ. | Believers living out their position in Christ through the Spirit's power.

The illustration in verses 15–23 shows that believers are not to continue in sin, for they do not have a license to sin.\(^{43}\) Emancipated from slavery to sin, believers, paradoxically, are to lead lives of unrestrained righteous service to (slavery in) Christ. Those justified by faith are to love and obey God by grace, not by the Law. Believers are not guided by the limited provisions and resources of the Law but by the redeeming and renewing resources of grace. Sin ends in death, and grace ends in eternal life (v. 23). Death is earned as a consequence of sin; eternal life is received as free and unmerited favor through faith in Christ.

As an analogy slavery in chapter 6 shows the stark condition of the believer under sin. Slavery demands total obedience. In the Roman world slaves were chattel, things to be bought and sold.\(^{44}\) A slave belonged wholly to his master. The slave was required to do his master's will to the fullest extent of his abilities and to serve his master's interests. One of the greatest paradoxes in Paul's epistles is that the believer is freed from a slavery that was malicious, harsh, and callous, then by faith becomes a slave of Christ, and is then paradoxically declared to have true freedom.

Paradoxically, transfer of ownership from sin to Christ results in freedom. But how is a slave set free? In the Roman world a slave could leave slavery by death or by his owner granting him freedom.

By going through the appropriate ceremony of manumission a slave could be given his freedom, and provided that the ceremony was appropriately performed, he was thereby given both his freedom and also citizenship. He became a freedman, his former owner becoming his patron, and a relationship continued between these two, a relationship that was terminated only in exceptional circumstances by the civil authorities intervening. . . . The twin statuses of freedman and patron were unique to Roman law.\(^{45}\)

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\(^{43}\) The statement in Romans 6:14, "you are not under law but under grace," leads to the question, How then can I avoid sin? Paul answered by arguing from the perspective of a changed life. Believers have been inwardly changed so that they will not be content to sin but will sincerely desire to live a God-glorifying life.


\(^{45}\) Ibid., 39–40. Lyall points out that there was nothing corresponding to the Roman status of freedmen in Jewish law and that even in Greek law nothing was quite as applicable for Paul's metaphor (ibid., 40–46). See also William W. Buckland, *A
This relationship between the freedman and the patron is intriguing in the sense that “the patron was under a duty to look after the needy freedman. . . Freed, apart from the patron’s obligation to care for him, he would have had no security. . . the patron could not be a witness against his freedman.” The relevance is striking: Once Christ sets the believer free, He then cares for him, and will never be a witness against him. However, the freedman was also obligated to his patron, as the believer is obligated to give faithful and obedient service to the One who has given him freedom from another master. Christ purchases the slave, sets him free, and shares a unique relationship with the freedman for life.

Only by the grace of God can a slave (a) be freed from the evil taskmaster of sin, (b) be bought by a loving master who sets him free, and then (c) become a member of the family of God. This is illustrated by the contrasting statements in verses 16–23.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verses 16–18</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sin and death</td>
<td>Obedience and righteousness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slaves to sin</td>
<td>Slaves to righteousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse 22</td>
<td>Verse 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formerly bondage</td>
<td>Now freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formerly slaves</td>
<td>Now servants of God</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formerly vice</td>
<td>Now holiness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formerly shame</td>
<td>Now peace of mind</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formerly death</td>
<td>Now life, even life everlasting</td>
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<td>Verse 23</td>
<td>Verse 23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wages of sin is death</td>
<td>Eternal life is God's free gift</td>
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Paul emphasized that in association with the death of Christ the Christian is released from being controlled by the hostile forces of sin, having been "redeemed . . . not with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18–19; cf. Rom. 6:4–8, 18, 22). Redemption from slavery involves the payment of a redemption price. Christ has paid the debt for the believers' sin by being punished and executed in their place. The power of sin has been broken by death, Christ's death. Therefore righteous living is expected of the Christian.\(^47\)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Legal position</th>
<th>Result</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past: Slaves of sin</td>
<td>Lawlessness</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now: Slaves of God</td>
<td>Sanctification</td>
<td>Eternal life</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The concept of "death to sin" (Rom. 6:10) is seen by Paul as the basis for victory over sin. It is also the refutation of the charge that grace leads to license (vv. 1, 15). While it may be theoretically conceivable that grace would open the door to sin, it is practically impossible because of the essential change that takes place in a person at the moment of salvation. "The point is . . . that obedience is an important part of the life lived in grace (cf. 1:5; 15:18; 16:26). The essence of sin is disobedience of God, while contrariwise to be obedient to God is the hallmark of the slave of God. The quality of our living shows whose we are."\(^48\) Therein is the paradox. A seemingly impossible thing—a slave being free—is not only possible but is also expected and demanded. Freedom is to be used for the sake of the Savior.

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47 Norman Kaye Bruce, "The Argument of Romans with Special Reference to Chapter 6" (Ph.D. diss., University of Basel, 1979), 117.

Righteousness in these last two instances [in 6:20–21] is best taken in a way related to its use in verse 18. That is, the more general meaning of righteousness in these two verses is “doing what God requires,” and in verse 18 the specific requirements that God makes are identified with the truths found in the teaching you received (from God). And because Paul speaks in this context of impurity and wickedness as the results of slavery to sin, so it is likely that the major emphasis in righteousness in this passage is on the moral and ethical demands that God makes on his people.\(^49\)

Victory over sin, however, is not easily or quickly realized. That is because sin still tries to assert authority in the believer’s life, and believers often submit to sin’s illegitimate authority. It is a lifelong process to experience the reality of “death to sin.” As Paul argued later, believers must “by the Spirit [be] putting to death the deeds of the body” (8:13). Victory over sin has its foundation at the cross of Christ, but the practical outworking of this truth is a process. The paradox rests with the truth of two antithetical statements producing a redefinition of a third truth: Believers are truly liberated to act correctly when under slavery to Christ, because they are uniquely associated with Him in an everlasting relationship. “Being bound to God and his will enables the person to become ‘free’—to be what God wants that person to be.”\(^50\)

APPLICATIONS: SLAVERY TO CHRIST MEANS TRUE FREEDOM

1. The paradox: Slavery to sin is destructive and cruel, while slavery to Christ is liberating and loving. Slavery can be freedom or captivity, depending on the slave’s response either to Christ or to the sin nature (Rom. 6).

2. Freedom begins when a person places faith in Christ as Savior, resulting in redemption, justification, and reconciliation.

3. Freedom to say “no” to the constant temptation of the sin nature and its attempt to enslave the one who is now Christ’s slave is settled by experiential sanctification (by the daily liberating obedience to the Spirit’s guidance and correction).

4. These four great biblical doctrines: redemption, justification, reconciliation, and sanctification explain and define the believers’ freedom as slaves to Christ (Rom. 6–8).


\(^50\) Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 402.
5. Antinomianism, the misuse of grace as a license to sin, is unthinkable for the one who is rightly related to Christ and who understands the new and unique relationship established at the moment of faith.

**SUMMARY**

Through paradoxes Paul was not presenting irreconcilable, antithetical positions. Instead he was using a literary device to accentuate a theological truth that could not be expressed as effectively by other means. When two truths are presented as a paradox (in seemingly contradictory statements), then the result is a third truth that overrides the first and second truths. This third truth is significant to the reader, either for doctrine or application or both. However, nonbelievers cannot grasp this third truth (1 Cor. 2:14). The three illustrations—in 1 Corinthians 1:17–25; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; and Romans 6:15–23—touch lightly on the many instances of Pauline paradoxes. However, these three passages demonstrate that paradoxes produce a new truth that is vital to understanding a believer's relationship in Christ.

As Tozer has written, the Christian life is a life of paradoxes, but paradoxes that reveal profound truths. The believer "talks familiarly every day to someone he cannot see, expects to go to heaven on virtue of another, empties himself in order that he might be full, admits he is wrong so he can be declared right, goes down in order to get up. He is strongest when he is weakest, richest when he is poorest, and happiest when he feels worst. He dies so he can live, forsakes in order to have, gives away so he can keep, sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, and knows that which passeth knowledge."51

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