

## Romans 14:1      Who are the weak in faith?

Romans 14 is challenging to understand. I think the main reason for this is because we are so culturally removed from 1<sup>st</sup> century Christianity. Yet I believe Romans 14 is a hugely important chapter, not least because it has been misapplied and used even in abusive ways (later).

**Romans 14:1 (NIV)** *Accept the one whose faith is weak, without passing judgment over disputable matters.*

Paul introduces *the one whose faith is weak* (better translated as, *the one being weak in faith*), almost out of nowhere, or so it seems. But who are the *weak in faith*, and how does this relate to what has gone before? Deciding who they are is the key to understanding the chapter, if not the whole of Romans.

Although there have been a number of suggestions about who the weak are, the most popular is that the weak are Jewish Christians who haven't yet shaken off the trappings of the Law, such as eating kosher food, Sabbath and Jewish festivals. I think this view is problematic for various reasons (later). It seems more likely that the *weak in faith* are Jews who have not yet believed in Christ even though they are showing considerable interest at this point. This I think is consistent with all Paul has said so far in Romans.

We may imagine someone who has been brought up in a Christian family yet who has never really come to believe in Jesus as Lord. In the same way we can imagine Jews who were thoroughly part of the community, but who had never really come to know the Lord (cf 1Samuel 3:7). The weaknesses of these Jewish not-yet-believers-in-Jesus was not due to continued attachment to dietary laws or special days, but due to attachment to their halacha, or rules of the synagogues (later). But the main thing that set them apart from the strong (Romans 15:1) were not religious rules, but their relationship to Christ: the weak in faith were not yet believers in Jesus. In Romans 9 Paul had expressed his great sorrow and anguish for his unbelieving Jewish brothers (Romans 9:1-2). (Note in Romans 14, he calls the weak *brothers*.)

However it is in Romans 15:1 where we can best understand the difference between the *weak in faith*, and those Paul calls *strong* (believers). A faithful translation of Romans 15:1 is as follows: *Now we are who strong ought to bear with the weaknesses of those without strength and not to please ourselves*. Here we can see that the ones Paul is contrasting are the *strong* and those *without strength*, that is, those who know the strength that comes from the Lord by faith in Jesus, and those who do not, because of unbelief.

Although Paul seems to introduce the weak and the strong in Romans 14 without explanation he has in fact already talked about the weak and the strong in faith, in Romans 4:18-25. Abraham was *not being weak in faith* (v19), when he considered the impossibility of have a child, through unbelief (v20). So we see that it is unbelief that causes this state of being *weak in faith*. But Abraham was *strong in faith* (v20), because he was fully convinced, (i.e. he believed) that God was able (had strength) to do what he had promised. And if we believe on Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, then like Abraham, we are justified by God, and we share the same strong faith by which Abraham was justified. This strong faith *is not from ourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no man may boast* (Ephesians 2:8).

Paul mentions the weak again in Romans 5:6, *For while we were still weak (powerless, without strength), at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.* From this we see that the weak are those who have not yet believed that Jesus died for them.

Further Bible study reveals more examples of those who are without strength / are weak / are powerless, identifying them as those in unbelief or disobedience.

Leviticus 26 is a chapter about the blessings and curses that would come to God's people as a result of obedience or disobedience. One of the consequences for disobedience is particularly relevant: *they shall stumble over one another, as if to escape the sword, though none pursues. And you shall have no power to stand before your enemies* (Leviticus 26:37). Who are the stumbling ones in Romans? It is the Jews who have not believed in Jesus who are stumbling: *they have stumbled over the stumbling stone* (Romans 9:32) – because of disobedience (Romans 10:21). Leviticus says, *they will have no power (strength).* In Romans 14 Paul is most concerned with the witness of the believers (the strong) towards the stumbling,

**Romans 14:21 KJV** *It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbles, or is offended, or is made weak.*

It is very interesting that in the Hebrew Old Testament (which is the OT in our Bibles) that the word *stumble* is often translated in the Greek Old Testament (which Paul used a lot) as *weak*. For example, Psalm 9:3, Israel's enemies will,

**Psalm 9:3 Hebrew, *stumble* and perish before your presence.**

**Psalm 9:3 Greek, *weaken* and be destroyed from your face.**

There are many examples in the Bible of those who stumble/are weak/are without strength through unbelief. Moses sent 12 spies to spy out the land; 10 were unbelieving, but two were strong in faith. Samson knew that his strength would go from him when he broke his Nazirite vows, and he would become as weak as any other man. To me it makes a lot of sense that the weak in faith in Romans 14 are Jews who have not yet believed in Jesus, but who at this point are showing great interest. Paul says, *As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, without passing judgment over disputable matters* (Romans 14:1).

One of the problems in thinking the *weak in faith* are Jewish believers in Jesus who still had scruples over food laws and special days, is Peter. In popular Christian understanding, Peter only realised he was free from dietary laws in Acts 10, after God gave him a vision of clean and unclean animals coming down from heaven, saying, *arise, kill and eat* (Acts 10:13). But, the main point of this vision was not to do with food laws, but God showing Peter he had accepted the Gentiles – *God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean,* (Acts 10:28). However, if as is usually taught it was also about God abolishing food laws, then according to Romans 14 Peter was weak in faith until Acts 10. But was Peter weak in faith when he preached on the day of Pentecost and saw 3000 souls saved (Acts 2); or healed the man at the temple gate (Acts 3); or faced the Sanhedrin and said, *We must obey God and not men* (Acts 5); or when he raised Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9)? This was not weak faith, but it was strong faith because Peter had been filled with Holy Spirit power at Pentecost. Peter's real weakness was when he denied his Lord through unbelief; his real weakness was when he and the other disciples were huddled away in a locked room for fear of the Jews. But Pentecost changed them, and it should change us as well. Peter was *made strong out of weakness*, and this had nothing to do with a change in his eating habits. But it had everything to do with his relationship to Christ and His power.