

The Most Important "Therefore" in the Bible

Romans 12:1-2

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One of my earliest college teachers taught me to ask a certain question every time I encountered the word "therefore" in the Bible. He told me to ask the question: Wherefore is that "therefore" there for?

So let's ask that question of what is, at least in my opinion, the single most important "therefore" in the Bible. It appears in Romans 12:1: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship" (CSB). Wherefore is that "therefore" there for?

That "therefore" cannot simply link with what came immediately before, even though that's the way most appearances of "therefore" function in any writing, including the Bible. But in this case, what immediately precedes this "therefore" is an explosion of praise to God for his inscrutable wisdom undergirding his purposes and plans in history. That outburst of praise doesn't account for a "therefore," and neither do the things Paul writes after this verse connect well with the immediate preceding context.

It turns out that most interpreters think that this explanatory conjunction marks the transition from the first major portion of Romans, chapters 1-11, to the second major portion of Romans, chapters 12-16. In other words, it connects to the entire preceding context. That's because this is the point where the letter changes. Paul is about to apply all the theological explanations he has been developing for the past eleven chapters. (To use grammatical-theological language, this is the point in the letter where Paul moves from the indicative to the imperative.) This suggestion is confirmed by Paul's use of the expression "by the mercies of God," which probably does not refer merely to what came immediately before, nor even to the preceding three chapters (9-11), but may in fact refer back to the "whole massive argument that preceded it," as Leon Morris suggests.¹

In other words, when Paul writes "Therefore...by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice..." he is saying something like: "Based upon all that I have written to you so far in this letter...that everyone is bound under sin...that justification comes only through the propitiation of Christ...that justification is by faith not by works...that everyone inherits sin through Adam, but in Christ is made alive...that we died and rose with Christ...that the Law no longer is our regulating principle...that sanctification is through the Holy Spirit...that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ...that Gentiles have been incorporated into God's plan for Israel...that God is sovereign in all he does...that God has a future plan for Israel.....based upon all of this(!), I urge you to present your bodies—your entire selves—as living sacrifices to God. Now let me lay out for you in the next four chapters how it works out in practice."

That's the reason the "therefore" of Romans 12:1 is probably the most important "therefore" in the Bible.



¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, PNTC (Leicester: Apollos and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 432.