

The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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The Guilt of the Jews (2:1-3:20)

What Advantage Is There in Being a Jew? (3:1-8)

*What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? ²Much in every way! First of all, **they have been entrusted with the oracles of God.** ³What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? ⁴Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge" (Psalm 51:4) ⁵But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) ⁶Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? ⁷Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" ⁸Why not say--as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say -- "Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is deserved.*

The response of the diatribe opponent is, "Then what is the advantage in being a Jew?" Does Israel's special relationship with their God count for nothing? Paul's answer: Israel was given the greatest treasure in human possession, the Jews were entrusted with the Oracles of God.

Entrusted with the Oracles of God

There is a special advantage to being a part of a community of believers, especially a community of believers whose beliefs are derived from special revelation from God. Paul's discussion in 2:12-16 argued that the Gentiles had a sense of right and wrong with reference to human behavior and that they would be judged by that sense of moral oughtness. He does not argue that this sense of moral oughtness could or would deliver them from the power of sin. The point of Paul's argument is to justify God's judgment upon them for their immoral behavior. Whether God saw any of the Gentile world as righteous in his eyes is something Paul does not address. Whatever sense of moral oughtness they possessed was not used to their advantage; in fact, it had only served as a means of judging them and finding them guilty of unbelief and immorality.

With the people of Israel it was different. They were entrusted with the Oracles of God. The expression "Oracles of God" says something of the esteem Paul, as well as the whole of Judaism, gave to the Hebrew Scriptures. According to Jewish tradition, the collection of writings known as the Hebrew Scriptures dated from the time of Moses in their origins, and had existed as a collected body of sacred writings from the time of Ezra the scribe. According to Nehemiah 8 (cf. Ezra 7:10) these writings had been brought to the homeland of the Jews from the land of Babylon (Persia) in the early part of the fifth century (400-350 BC). These writings had been preserved by a guild of scribes known as the *Sopherim*, later called the *Massoretes*. The very Scriptures used today in Judaism are the Hebrew Scriptures preserved by these scribes, called the Massoretic Text (*i.e.*, *the Biblia Hebraica*).

This collection of writings was Israel's most valued treasure. The scrolls containing the manuscripts of the Scriptures were kept in the Temple and in the synagogues in a special chest called the Ark of the Covenant. When these scribes copied these writings, they would immerse themselves before writing a single letter in order to be pure in the presence of God. Every letter of every word was counted in the manuscripts being prepared for use in the Temple and synagogues. Those who copied Scripture, called the scribes, were held in high esteem and were often recognized as scholars because of their familiarity with the texts of the Scripture. Among the most prestigious of the Jewish leaders were those known as lawyers. These were not attorneys at law, but scholars of the Torah (the Hebrew Scriptures).

Those Jewish males who were taught to read and write Hebrew, were taught from the Hebrew Scriptures. In the synagogue services, one could not sit while reading from the scrolls of the Hebrew Scriptures, and when the chest containing the scrolls was opened before the people it was as though a theophany of God had occurred. The reverence given to the copying, handling, and use of the Hebrew Scriptures can be seen in the archaeological discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were treated as virtual icons of the presence of God in the midst of his people. The worn out manuscripts of Scripture were entombed in a special room of the synagogue called a *Genizah*; they were buried like a person because they could not be burned or destroyed in any way.

They are referred to variously in the New Testament. To Jesus, the Old Hebrew Scriptures were **the word of God**. In Mark 7:13 he says of the scribes, "You nullify the word of God by the tradition that you have handed down." They are most usually called **the Scriptures**, "You err," says Jesus to the Sadducees, "because you do not know the Scriptures" (Matt 22:29). In Rom 1:2 Paul calls them, **the Holy Scriptures**, "the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures." In 2 Tim 3:16 he states that, "all Scripture is inspired of God." In 2 Tim 3:15 he calls them **the sacred writings**, and in Rom 3:2 calls them **the oracles of God**, "What advantage then has the Jew? or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way: first of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God."

With Israel God was not only the God reason demands, he was the God who had made his name known, whose presence and power had been a reality in the history of this people. Theirs was a history filled with the wonder of God's activity in their midst. As Paul states in Rom 9:4-5, "to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ." Theirs was a wonder filled story of privilege and advantage. But theirs was not a story of a people who reflected by who they were the effects of the presence and power of God in their midst.

They Heard (*Shama*) But Would Not Harken (*Shamar*)!

The Hebrew word *shama* means, "to hear," the word *shamar* means, "to take heed, keep, guard or preserve what one has heard." The Jews had and had heard the Oracles of God but they had not kept, guarded or

preserved the word of God in their lives. Even though the presence and power of God was in their midst, theirs was a story of people who were consumed with "their own presence" and obsessed with the exercise of "their own power." Because of this, their righteousness had been turned into wickedness and their wickedness had brought them condemnation. This is the point Paul has been driving toward throughout this whole passage. There is none righteous, Gentile nor Jew - all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Following Paul's declaration of the advantage of being entrusted with the Oracles of God, another question is anticipated coming from Paul's diatribe opponent. This question concerns the faithfulness of God's promise to Israel that he would be their God and they would be his chosen people. God had promised their forefathers following the exodus from Egypt:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'
(Exodus 19:5-6)

If one considers the historical setting of this promise, he will learn that this promise was taken by Moses to the people and was presented to them as a covenant God would make between himself and Israel. Israel's reply to Moses was, "We will do everything the Lord has said." (19:8). God's promise was an "If-Then" agreement. "**If** you obey me fully and keep my covenant, **then** out of the nations you will be my treasured possession . . ." The fact of history is that they did not obey him, nor did they keep his covenant. This fact is evidenced from the book of Joshua through the book of Malachi. How did the Jews, then, come to believe that God could be held to his promise? This was the conclusion the scholars had reached do to the fact that again and again, God had renewed his promise to Israel; therefore, God would never forsake Israel. Paul's argument is that God's promise of deliverance to Israel must be understood as a promise to each and every Israelite who would come to him in belief and repentance. Their belief must now, according to Paul, center in his Messiah, through whom both Jew and Gentles would receive deliverance from the power of sin. But here is the great mystery concerning the Jews, they were the trustees of the Scriptures, they revered them so much they virtually made them an icon of God's presence, but they could not see in them was so clearly revealed, nor could they hear what was so clearly said to them concerning the Messiah. In John

5:39 Jesus says to the Jews, “You search the Scriptures because in them you think you have eternal life, yet these are they which testify of me, but you will not come to me that you may have life.”

The Question of God’s Faithfulness

Paul continues his diatribe in verse 3 with the question of whether the unfaithfulness of some Jews had brought about condemnation of all Jews.

“What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?” What if some of the Jews did not keep faith, will their disbelief turn God from faithfulness to his promise? *“Not at all!”* Paul argues, ***“Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: “So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge” (Psalm 51:4).*** God cannot lie, he has been and will be true to his word, as is stated in Psalm 51, but the point Paul has been laboring to make is that God’s promise was to Israel as individual Israelites; he never promised to grant Israel a status of corporate righteousness, this was a belief rooted in the traditions of the Jewish sages.

Then follows a further argument: “But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us?” If because of their unrighteousness, God sent Christ to save them, how could he be justified in bring his wrath upon them, would he not then be unjust? The obvious answer, from Paul’s point of view, would be that each person would be judge based on his own individual behavior. The argument he addresses here assumes a concept of corporate redemption rather than individual salvation, which is the assumption he addresses throughout this diatribe.)

Then in verse 6, he responds, “Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?” If God has come into the world to save it and his work of redemption was accomplished in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, how can he then judge and condemn anyone.) “Someone might argue,” says Paul, “If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” The answer is “individual accountability.” Take away the belief in corporate redemption and you have taken away the Jews sense of inclusive security and replaced it with individual responsibility and accountability.

“Why not say,” Paul continues, “as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say--**Let us do evil that good may result?**” Here Paul addresses an accusation of libertinism being made against him by those who saw his teaching concerning God’s grace as a license to sin. “If we are saved by faith in Christ,” the argument goes, “then how can we be lost, no matter what we do?” Can we ever be lost if we are “in Christ?” The answer, as developed in chapters 6-8, has to do with the fact that in Christ we are free and true or real freedom implies responsibility. We are responsible for our behavior and we are held accountable for our behavior. “Responsibility” is the operative word here, a concept not happily embraced in the Jewish theology of the first century, nor by Reformed Theology of Christians in later centuries.)

(4) The Conclusion of the Foregoing Line of Argumentation (3:9-20)

*What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. ¹⁰As it is written: "There is **no one** righteous, not even one; ¹¹there is **no one** who understands, **no one** who seeks God. ¹²All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is **no one** who does good, not even one," (Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Eccles. 7:20). ¹³"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit" (Psalm 5:9) The poison of vipers is on their lips"(Psalm 140:3). ¹⁴"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." (Psalm 10:7) ¹⁵"Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ruin and misery mark their ways, ¹⁷and the way of peace they do not know."(Psalm 59:7-8) ¹⁸"There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Psalm 36:1) ¹⁹Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*

The conclusion, to which Paul has reasoned from 1:18-3:8, is that there is none righteous, no not one, both Gentiles and Jews stand before God enslaved to sin (3:9-20). The following lines contain the conclusion to the whole matter; the sad fact is that the whole human race - both Jews and Gentiles - are destroyed and enslaved to the power of sin. This conclusion is followed by a running connection of Scriptures that supports Paul's

argument. All are taken from the Greek Septuagint and are quoted rather freely.

The first is: "*None is righteous, no, not one, no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one*" (3:10-12). This quotation is taken from Psalms 14:1-4.

The second is: "*Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive*" (3:13), from Psalms 5:9.

The third: "*The venom of asps is under their lips*" (3:13), is taken from Psalms 140:3.

The fourth is: "*Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness*" (3:14), Psalms 10:7.

The fifth is: "*Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know*" (3:15-17), taken from Isa 59:7-8 and Prov 1:16.

The sixth is: "*There is no fear of God before their eyes*" (3:18), Psalms 36:1.

What is Paul doing with the quotation of all this Scripture? He is reinforcing the case of his gospel, the redemption drama he is attempting to spread throughout the world. The human race, as it stands before God, is under sin (*pantas huph hamartian* – all are under sin, v 9). The Greek word Paul uses for “sin” has the same meaning as the Hebrew word, “to miss the mark, to fall short, to fail.” Man was created in the very image of God; his moral character was given him by his Creator. He was also given freedom of will, and this had resulted in the destruction of his moral character. In fact, through his choices, man had morally destroyed himself. This is the meaning of the Greek word *apollumi*, which Jesus uses in his statement, “I have some to seek and save that which was lost (*apollumi*)” (Lk 19:10). *Apollumi* is a combination of *apo* (from, separation) and *olethros* (ruined/destroyed), thus, “to set aside as ruined/destroyed.”

This is the sad story of the being God created in his own image, and especially so with those who had been entrusted with the Oracles of God.

But this is not the final chapter of the story. This is “the chapter” Paul takes up in the following section (3:21-8:39), which makes up the heart of this Pauline composition. What he has done in this section of material (1:18-3:20) is establish the case that man has fallen under the power of sin and is destroyed. He will now move to, “The Messianic Deliverance.”

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