

# Humanity Stands Before God

## – Romans 2

Towards the end of **chapter 1**, Paul set out how the existence of God is evident and visible to **every** person and that, despite that fact, everyone has turned away from him and embraced the foolishness of idolatry.

The result is those awful thrice-repeated words: “*God gave them over*” in **Romans 1:24,26 & 28**. In some translations, it sounds even worse: “*God gave them up*”. The word is used in many places in the New Testament, including for Judas’s betrayal of Jesus but also in **Matthew 11:27**, where Jesus says that the Father has **handed over** all things to him and also in **Matthew 25:14**, where the rich man going on a journey **entrusts** various amounts of money (‘talents’) to his slaves. So this word means a complete handover or surrender of control!

The same word is used in **Ephesians 4:19**, where Paul paints the picture from the opposite side:– “*they . . . have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.*”

The last verse of **Romans 1** paints the fateful picture of people who know what God wants but deliberately go the opposite way and encourage others to do the same . . .

### **Romans 2:1-11**

Therefore, says Paul, you have no excuse if you condemn others for going this way, simply because you do exactly the same things, and because we all know that God’s judgment of wrongdoing is completely fair (literally ‘according to truth’ in **v.2**).

And what makes us think that we can get away with our own wrongdoing because of God’s kindness, tolerance and patience? Rather the opposite! God’s kindness is designed to lead us to repentance – a radical re-think about our own actions, a total change of mind about how we lead our lives. (**v.3-4**)

By refusing to have that radical re-think and being stubborn about it, we risk building up a store of God’s anger towards us on the day when God’s judgment is revealed (**v.5**). The word translated ‘stubbornness’ is the word from which we have the medical term *sclerosis*, which means an abnormal hardening. Going on refusing to respond to God’s kindness results in a hardening which eventually makes faith impossible – see **Hebrews 3:12- 4:1**. (Same word in **v.13** - hardened).

God’s judgment, Paul says, is completely impartial, strictly according to what each one has done. The reward is eternal life for persevering in doing good and so seeking glory, honour and immortality. But scheming and moral wrongdoing, refusing to obey truth, lead directly to God’s fierce anger (**v.6-8**).

There is a solemn warning about the need to **continue** in right relationship with God in **Ezekiel 33:10-20**. (See also **Luke 8:15, 1 Corinthians 15:2, Hebrews 3:6,14, 4:14, 10:23, Revelation 2:13, 25, 3:11, 12:17,19:10** – amongst others!)

Again, Paul emphasises God’s total impartiality, whether we are Jew or Gentile – tribulation and distress on the one hand, glory, honour and peace on the other (**v.9-11**).

### **Romans 2:12-16**

A further demonstration of God’s impartiality, but still his judgment! Whether we have received the Jewish Law or not, we will be judged by what we have received. When Gentiles (= ‘the nations’, i.e. other than Israel) may ‘by nature’ do what the Jewish Law requires, it demonstrates again what we saw in **Romans 1:18-23**, in other words that everyone has an awareness of God

and is accountable to him as a result. Judgment is coming, through the Jesus the Anointed One, and all the secrets of mankind will be judged. Will their/our thoughts accuse or defend them/us?

### **Romans 2:17-29**

Then Paul turns to the Jews among his readers and listeners. He is writing to the church in Rome, and we might have thought that they would all (or mostly) be Romans. But we know that Aquila and Priscilla were obliged to leave Rome at an earlier date by an edict of the Emperor Claudius (**Acts 18:2**), so there will have been a significant number there at that earlier time and many will have returned later. And perhaps some of the returnees would have been believing Jews who, like Aquila and Priscilla, had responded to the gospel elsewhere. Whatever their history, there were enough of them in the church fellowship for Paul to take these few verses to expand on whether the Jewish Law is valuable – or not! Perhaps he is also taking the opportunity to equip the Roman believers with some of the points that they could use when sharing the gospel with Jews that they meet.

Some of these points are parallel with what we have studied in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches.

### **Romans 2:17-24**

Beware hypocrisy! Saying one thing and doing another! Exactly how the Pharisees had behaved when Jesus criticised them so harshly (e.g. **Matthew 23:13-39**). These verses are so scathing that we must hope that Paul's words are not specifically addressed to the believers there in Rome, but rather to a common Jewish attitude which they found around them.

### **Romans 2:25-29**

Is circumcision (or any other outward religious observance) of any value? Basically, here Paul says again what he wrote in **Galatians 5:6** "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.*" As all Jews knew, circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with Abraham, which was set up hundreds of years before the Jewish Law was established. Promises made by God and faith exercised by Abraham.

So someone who is ignorant of the requirements of the Jewish Law, but who responds in faith to God and follows his requirements, is in a much better position than someone else who knows all the details but simply does not follow them (**v.26-27**).

But a **real Jew**, says Paul, is one *'who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God'* (**v.29**). Interesting! He seems to say that **any** believer (Jew or Gentile – 'of the nations') is actually a true Jew, but one who is outwardly a Jew but lacks that heart relationship with God **is not really a Jew in God's sight!** Wow! That would have really offended religious Jews!

If you want to start following up some more of Paul's understanding about the validity and value (or not!) of Jewish circumcision, see **Philippians 3:3** and **Colossians 2:11-15** (both written to churches in Gentile cities). The 'circumcision' that really counts, he says, is our death to our old life and our newness of 'resurrection' life because we have been joined to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. He will come to that a little later in this letter to the Roman believers (**Romans 6, 7 & 8**)!

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