

Law and Faith – Romans 3

As we start into **chapter 3**, Paul continues to consider the position of the Jews in regard to the gospel, but rapidly extends his thoughts to include everyone.

At the end of **chapter 2**, he had effectively said that any believer in the Lord Jesus as Messiah is more of a true Jew than someone who can prove their Jewish ancestry and who has observed all the essential Jewish traditions, especially circumcision. That will have shocked some of his readers – obviously especially the Jewish ones – and so will have raised one specially vital question: Is there any advantage in being a Jew?

His answer in **3:2** seems to be simply that God had given the Jews ‘the oracles of God’. In other words, God’s words down the centuries. From our present-day viewpoint, we are accustomed to having all the Jewish scriptures at our disposal – the Old Testament.

But to Gentile believers in the first century, all those writings would be literally a closed book, though that situation would soon change as Paul and the other apostles quoted freely from the Old Testament and believers from Jewish backgrounds will have seen fulfilment of many Old Testament prophecies. Gentile believers will have started to see the value of the old scriptures and will have adopted them as their own, a situation which we have inherited today. In a very real way, Gentile believers were becoming true Jews!

Paul will come back to this theme in later chapters. It is perhaps surprising to see how much of this letter concerns the Jews and their relationship with God. Hot issues which needed to be resolved! Another indicator, perhaps, that there will probably have been a substantial number of Jews in Rome – and in the church there!

As I have been looking at the early chapters of Romans again for these studies, I have begun to feel that perhaps Paul is setting out the basics of the gospel not just for the personal and group benefit of the believers in Rome, but also to equip them with some more understanding so that they can pass on the good news as fully as possible – and perhaps especially to the Jews with whom they had frequent contact.

Maybe this is a reflection of Paul’s customary practice of always going first to the Jews whenever he visited a new place? Do these chapters perhaps give us some better idea of the message which he used to share in the synagogues on his travels? See **Acts 9:20, 13:5,14-40,14:1,16:13** (not a synagogue, but a place of prayer on the Jewish Sabbath, so probably Jewish), **17:1-3,10,17, 18:4,19:8,28:17,23**. “*To the Jew first and also to the Greek*” (**Romans 1:16, 2:10**).

So, moving on from the fact that the Jews ‘were entrusted with the oracles of God’, Paul reverts back to what he wrote about in **2:24**: Is God’s own reputation being called into question because some of his own chosen people were not faithful to the covenant and promises contained in those words which had been entrusted to them? (It may help our understanding of Paul’s thinking when we know that the words ‘entrusted’, ‘faith’, ‘faithfulness’ and ‘unbelief’ all come from the same root, and so are similar-sounding words in the original Greek).

3:3 ‘Just because some of his own chosen people did not (or do not) believe, that doesn’t put God’s own faithfulness out of action, does it?’ Of course not! The quotation from **Psalm 51** in **v.4** implies that somehow God himself could be ‘on trial’, but that his righteousness will shine out by contrast with human unrighteousness.

3:5-8 The NIV has this passage nice and clear: “*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? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is just! "

V.9-18 This is a series of quotations from the Psalms and Isaiah, which would have been familiar to the **Jews** who were reading this letter, but not to the Gentiles. Here Paul is bringing into their understanding that, just as those without the Jewish Law have all failed to meet God's standards (as we saw in **Romans 1 & 2**), those those with the Law have utterly failed as well!

With our Biblical knowledge and our history, it may seem to us that Paul has taken a long time and a detailed discussion to come to this simple point: *"both Jews and Greeks are all under sin"* (v.9). But he has felt the need to completely clear the religious trappings out of the way and say that **no-one will appear righteous in God's sight by following the Jewish Law – or any other law!** Very much the same message as we find in **Galatians 3!**

3:19-20 sums it up for those who might try to follow the Jewish Law: Laws in general and the Jewish law in particular will not give anyone good standing in God's eyes. Their purpose is to show us as accountable to God and to make us **aware** of sin and to **recognise it!**

3:21-26 Now there is a new kind of right standing before God: God's **own** righteousness, as a gift to every single one who believes, with absolutely no distinction between us, simply because we have all failed and have not met God's standards.

It's a GIFT, by the grace of God and through *'the redemption which is in Christ Jesus'* – literally, the deliverance or 'freeing away'. **FREEDOM!**

Paul says that God displayed Jesus publicly as a 'propitiation' and he uses the Greek word for the 'mercy seat' which was the covering for the Ark of the Covenant in **Exodus 25** and many other places in the Old Testament (and in **Hebrews 9:5**). This was the place where God's presence dwelt in the Tabernacle, and where the high priest sprinkled the blood of the sin offering for all the people of Israel (see **Leviticus 16**). Paul could hardly be clearer: The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross now takes the place of the sin offering which needed to be made repeatedly under the old covenant. Now it has been accomplished 'once for all'! See especially **Hebrews 7:27, 9:12 & 10:10** – and in many other places! It's a **demonstration of God's righteousness!** (**3:26**)

3:27-31 No room for boasting! The Jew can not claim any advantage over the Gentile; boasting is excluded by what Paul calls 'the law of faith'.

The way that 'law' works is that we are put right with God through trusting in the redemption that he has given us through the death of Jesus – nothing to do with obeying laws, Jewish or otherwise!

God is the God of all people, and justifies everyone the same way – through faith.

'Does this put law out of action?' asks Paul. 'No', he says, 'this actually backs up and establishes the Jewish Law!'

. . . and he follows on to write about Abraham in the next chapter . . .

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