

Romans Part 10 – Chapter 3:1-5

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In chapter 2 Paul we learned that all people, both the Jews and Gentiles, have earned God's judgment with their own sinfulness. Those under the law of Moses, the Jews, have all broken the law. The fact that they have the law and even that they are circumcised, as all male Jews were, will not keep them from answering to God for their own personal sin.

In that sense, Paul has said, there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles. So, is there any advantage to being included in the Jewish people and being circumcised, as God has commanded? Paul answers this question using a sort of back-and-forth approach in chapter 3:

Romans 3:1-8

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ² Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³ What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴ By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,

*“That you may be justified in your words,
and prevail when you are judged.”*

⁵ But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) ⁶ By no means! For then how could God judge the world? ⁷ But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸ And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

Romans 3:1

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?

By asking these questions, then providing answers, Paul gives a very direct counter to anyone who might raise those points in objection to his teachings. Notice Paul will now agree in the next verse with the fact that the Jews were special and God's chosen people. But it will show the faithfulness of God, not the quality of the Jewish people.

In chapter 2 Paul address the question “Do they have a spiritual advantage? Do they have an in with God that nobody else has? Do they have a security with God that no one else has? After all, they are the chosen people. And we found out that there is no spiritual advantage.

We can ask “Is there a historical advantage.” I think John MacArthur says it best when he says:

“If you look at the picture historically and you trace the story of the Jew, you might conclude that there was little or no advantage at all. Theirs is a sad saga of struggle, of war, captivity and death. They have been hated, persecuted, slandered, imprisoned, slaughtered, and this repeatedly through their history. And yet they live on almost defiantly as an indestructible seed. Today rebuilding their small piece of land in the center of the world, they are a noble people made even more noble by their struggles.

But looking at the story of the Jew historically, it would seem that there was little advantage to being Jewish. They were slaves in Egypt for over 400 years under the bondage of Pharaoh, who were given the most menial tasks and also they were given circumstances which made those tasks even more difficult. When they were dispossessed from Egypt they wandered in the desert for 40 years until an entire generation of them died off in the wilderness without ever having a home. When they finally entered into the land of Canaan, they had to save themselves from the destruction of the surrounding peoples who constantly attacked them both religiously, morally and in warfare. They were slaughtered and taken captive finally by the Assyrians first and then the Babylonians. From the Assyrian captivity they never returned and from the Babylonian captivity it was 70 years before a remnant began to come back.

After returning from the captivity in Babylon, they set out to rebuild their land from the rubble and were mocked and harassed and hindered and unaided in their efforts. They were dominated by the Greek Antiochus Epiphanes when they were under Greek rule and he took liberties to desecrate their religion, desecrate their priesthood, desecrate their holy place, quell their rebellions by slaughtering many of them. Their babies were massacred by Herod.

Their land was oppressed by Roman legions. They were utterly devastated under the power of Rome. In 70 A.D. the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus Vespasian, the great general of the Roman army. One point one million, according to Josephus, were murdered, slaughtered. One hundred thousand bodies of the Jews were thrown over the wall in some kind of sport. Two years before that, the Gentiles of Caesarea slew twenty thousand Jews and sold thousands more of them into slavery. In a single day the inhabitants of Damascus cut the throats of ten thousand Jews. In the actual siege itself, there was devastation beyond description in the city of Jerusalem. One hundred thousand remaining fugitives from that sacking of the city were sold into slavery. Many more died in the gladiator games sponsored by Rome.

In 115 A.D. the Jews of Cyrene, Egypt, Cyprus and Mesopotamia rose up against Rome and tried to defeat Rome and were unsuccessful, and so Hadrian, the emperor, destroyed 985 towns in Palestine and slew at least 600 thousand men. More perished through starvation, through disease and through fire. So many were sold as slaves that their price dropped to that of a horse. The legal code of Theodosius, who was the emperor of Rome around 380 A.D., contained ideas of Jewish inferiority and the ideas of Theodosius and Jewish inferiority permeated all of western society and western law in the centuries to follow.

For two centuries they were oppressed under the Byzantines. Heraclitus banished them from Jerusalem in 628 and endeavored to exterminate them again. Leo the Assyrian in around 723 A.D. gave them the choice between Christianity and banishment. When the first crusade was launched in 1096 to recapture the holy places from the Ottoman Turks, the crusaders entered the Jewish settlement of Anjon and Preton and trampled three thousand Jews to death under their horses' hooves. And they did it in the name of Christianity.

In 1254 Louis IX banished them from France. In 1306 Philip the Fair expelled 100 thousand of them from the same country. During the scourge of the Black Death in 1348 and 1349 the charge was made that the Black Death or the Great Plague was caused by the Jews who had poisoned the wells and they endeavored to slaughter the Jews and many of them fled to Poland and to Russia.

In 1492 the Jews were expelled from Spain as Columbus was heading to discover America. In 1496 they were expelled from Portugal.

Soon after, all of Western Europe was closed to them except a few spots in northern Italy and Germany. Toward the middle of the seventeenth century in Poland, more persecution broke out. And though the French Revolution tended to emancipate some of the European Jews around 1789 or so, anti-Semitism continued in many areas, and particularly in the Ukraine early in the 1800s there were massacres of Jews.

I think we all remember the nineteenth century Dreyfus affair in which Dreyfus, a Jewish officer, was accused of treason. And an attempt began to oust the Jews from all the higher ranks of the French army. Their only hope for preservation really was the rebirth of Zionism. And it did happen and it rallied the Jewish people so that in 1897 they held their first Zionist congress in Basel. The first little colony of Zionists returned to the land in about 1873, and by 1914 there were ninety thousand Jews in their land, though it wasn't yet their land. Their identity had been miraculously preserved through this incredible series of massacres through all of the years of their existence.

And, of course, it all came to a horrifying climax in the 1940s when six million of them were systematically exterminated. And anti-Semitism was no longer racial as it had been in the Middle Ages, it was...rather no longer religious as it had been in the Middle Ages but it became racial. So that the legacy of all of that today in the world is not that we have a religious anti-Semitism but we still have what is left of a racial anti-Semitism. And Jewish people today find themselves in many cases to be hated, to be slandered, to be defamed, to be misunderstood, to be mocked.

And I give you all of that just to help answer that question, what advantage then hath the Jew? Frankly, historically there is little advantage at all, if any. From the historical perspective the answer would be no advantage. But Paul is not really dealing in terms of history.”

The answer can be found in a parable Jesus told in **Matthew 22:1-10**:

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, ² “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, ³ and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. ⁴ Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.”’

⁵ But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. ⁷ The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ ¹⁰ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Romans 3:2

² Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.
Paul insists that there is an advantage – “*much in every way.*”

In the Old Testament, you can read repeatedly of the tremendous and consistent blessing of God upon His people. Paul will comment on this advantage in **Romans 9:4**:

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

What advantage? Many advantages. You've been the ones who are adopted as God's special people. You've received the glory. What is that? The very Shekinah glory of God led them by day, led them by night, was in the midst of their holy places. You have received the covenants, Abrahamic, Davidic, Mosaic, Palestinian, all of those. You have been given the law. Yours has been the service of God through the priests and the prophets. You have received the promises. Yours are the fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Joseph. And yours is the Christ. Much, much privilege.

They were marks of God's care, they were marks of God's concern, they were marks of God's love. They were aids to their deliverance from sin. They were instructions for the blessing of the Holy Spirit. God gave them all of these things and they just never really lived up to what they possessed. Great advantage, great privilege, great priority, great preeminence was given to the people of Israel but they wasted it. They had the privilege of proclaiming the true God. They had the privilege of revealing the Messiah. They had the privilege of blessing from God as they served faithfully. They had the privilege of a land. They had a privilege of an ultimate restoration and glory in the final kingdom. They had all of these privileges.

Amos 3:2 says: *you only have I entered into intimacy with of all the nations of the earth.* That's privilege. But they never understood the rest of the verse. Same verse, Amos 3:2 says, *"Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."* See, high privilege, high responsibility.

Next, Paul leverages the fact that they *"were entrusted with the Oracles of God"* by quoting from a series of Old Testament passages. These Scriptures show that those writers also agreed that nobody, not one person, deserves to be called righteous. Paul declares emphatically that no one will be justified by following the works of the law.

Finally, though, he arrives at the good news: righteousness before God is available apart from the law through faith in Christ's death for our sin on the cross. I don't think Paul is trying to appease the Jewish reader, and I don't think he's trying to "trap" the Jewish reader. I believe he is truly trying to clarify that the God of the Old Testament is the same God he trusts now.

Remember Paul wrote in chapter 2:12 that individual Jewish people will stand before God's judgment for their sins *"For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law."*

This will happen even though the people of Israel had been given the law, and even if they have been circumcised. This is because each of the Jews—individually—have broken God's law, just as every Gentile has also sinned. So Paul raises the logical question in the previous verse: What's the point, then, of being a Jew? Is there any advantage? Does it matter that they are circumcised?

Now he answers that question with a definite "yes." There is "much advantage in every way." God's chosen people benefit in many ways, starting with this one: They were entrusted with the "oracles of God." In other words, the Jewish people were given the enormous privilege of receiving and handing down the very words of God to all people.

Paul's point in Romans 2 was not that belonging to Israel was of no value at all. His point was simply that Jewishness, itself, would not keep any person from answering to God's judgment for his or her sin. Paul will list more of the benefits that come with being of the Jewish people in Romans 9:1–5.

Romans 3:3

What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

First, it's important to note God's faithfulness in the face of unfaithfulness increases His glory. That does not mean, however, that God wants human beings to continue to sin, as some were accusing Paul of teaching.

Here in verse 3 he asks the next logical question: "What if some were unfaithful?" By this, Paul seems to be pointing to what he said in the previous chapter. The Jewish people were given God's law, but they did not keep it. As a nation and as individuals, every Jewish person had sinned. Nobody can keep the law perfectly, and even those who had been "entrusted with the oracles of God" (Romans 3:2) were not immune to sin.

Paul's questioner follows by asking, does the unfaithfulness of some of the Jewish people nullify God's faithfulness to His people? Does their sin make His faithfulness pointless? In other words, does the fact that those under the law broke the law, that they sinned as all people do, mean that God will no longer be faithful to them?

In the following verse, Paul will answer this question with a loud and emphatic "no."

Romans 3:4

By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,

*"That you may be justified in your words,
and prevail when you are judged."*

In modern English, this might be stated, loudly, as "no way!" In Greek, it reads "*mē genoito*," literally meaning "let it not be" or "may it never be so." English translations use the phrases such as "God forbid," "Not at all," and "By no means!" This exclamation is repeated many times in Romans.

Paul insists that God's faithfulness does not depend on human faithfulness. The sentence, "God will be true even if every man is a liar" may come from Psalm 116:11. Then Paul quotes directly from Psalm 51:4 to describe this aspect of God's character: "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged."

In other words, God always keeps His word and remains faithful to His people no matter what they do. That's why His words and judgments are justified. He never ever breaks His side of any covenant agreement.

Romans 3:5

But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)

For the third time in a row, Paul asks a question of himself, as if challenging his own statements at the end of Romans chapter 2. There, he wrote that all people, both Gentiles and Jews, will be judged by God for their sin. Jews will not be spared God's judgment because they have the law or have been circumcised. Those things matter, but all Jews have broken the law just as all Gentiles have been sinful.

Now Paul asks, "If God's righteousness is revealed by our unrighteousness—by our sinfulness—why would God inflict His anger on us? Isn't that unfair? In fact, doesn't that make God *Himself* unrighteous?" Put another way, "If our being bad makes God look good, why is God angry with us? Why would He punish us, especially those of us in His chosen people Israel?"

Paul includes an aside here, clarifying that he is speaking from a purely human perspective, using a human argument. Many translations put that last sentence in parenthesis to show that Paul is breaking character from this questioner to make it clear to his readers just how ridiculous this question is. This is also intended, by Paul, to clarify that this is not a statement or teaching which he, himself, is making. Rather, this is a point Paul is posing simply to clarify what he is *not* saying in this letter.

Paul will answer this imagined question with a resounding "no" in the following verses.

Romans 3:6-20

⁶ By no means! For then how could God judge the world? ⁷ But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸ And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

No One Is Righteous

⁹ What then? Are we Jews^[a] any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰ as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one."

¹³ "Their throat is an open grave;

they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of asps is under their lips."

¹⁴ "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."

¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known."

¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.