

Romans 3

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We come to one of the more difficult pieces of Paul's writing! Some commentaries just omit whole chunks of this chapter, and I can understand why. I use different translations at different times, KJV/NIV/NRSV, as certain complexities are resolved better by certain translations.

In Chapters 1 and 2 Paul has presented the case against unbelieving Israel; since Israel had been whittled down to 'the Jews', (the tribes of Judah, Benjamin & Levi living in Judea), the case simply becomes the case against the Jews. (As we go through Romans, we will see that Paul uses variant definitions at different junctures which we need to keep abreast of). In a sense Paul is actually acting as the Counsel for the Prosecution bringing God's case against the unbelieving Jews to them. In the first two chapters, having delivered the most savage of prosecutions in all history, Paul then has to allow the case for the defence. In this chapter he creates a voice, which he refers to as '[speaking as a man](#)', who puts the Jewish side of the case. The chapter is really a ping-pong between the defence and the prosecution, where the defence can be characterized as the archetypal unbelieving Pharisaically-trained Jew. In the chapter we will see Paul bat away various Jewish objections, conclude apostate Jewry's guilt, and then summarize the new covenant and the faith basis of Christianity.

We begin with a question, which effectively comes from the unbelieving Jew:

[1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?](#)

The logic behind the question is simple. Paul has not only detailed the very severe wrath awaiting apostate Jews, he has just made it clear that not only is the gospel now open to all mankind, but that non-Jews, by having a heart for God, can be good as Jews, (Romans 2:28-29). So from a Jewish standpoint, the non-Jews get all the benefits of salvation, and none of the downside. In fact, we can go one step further, and say that non-Jews can be Jews, except minus any of the punishments reserved for the Jews! The downside falls solely on the Jews. To the indignant Jew, this seems very unfair. Basically he is saying, 'Who on earth would want to be a Jew? What is the point?'. To understand Paul's reply, we will need though to understand the way he has phrased the initial question. By adding a second question, about circumcision, Paul has made it clear that being an Israelite is the underlying issue here. Circumcision of course was the mark that defined you as being an Israelite.

His reply is:

[2 Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles \(logion\) of](#)

God (theos).

Logion theos means 'words of God'. As Paul has clearly qualified in the original questions that by Jew he means Israelite, we can then understand his answer as being something like "the words of God given to Israel". The actual words that Paul is talking about here are the words God spoke to Abraham, generally referred to as the Abrahamic Covenant and the Promises. Dr Jones says that 'logion theos' refers to the Law, but that runs completely contrary to what Paul has just said, and is a ludicrous idea. It is the Law that condemns the Jews to death, and as Paul says elsewhere, being under the Law is a curse for them (Galatians 3:10), so the idea that the Jews were massively blessed because of the Law is foolish in the extreme. Furthermore, the Law was never actually entrusted to Israel, it was imposed on them. (However the Abrahamic promises and covenant were entrusted to them). Really, Paul has given us the answer in the first verse anyway; circumcision was the mark of the Abrahamic covenant, not the Horeb Covenant, so it should be fairly obvious here that logion theos means the words of the Abrahamic covenant and promises. So what Paul is saying is that in being an Israelite under the Abrahamic covenant you were massively blessed, as God stated in Genesis 12*:

12 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation (people), and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Much of Romans deals with the centrality of faith to Christianity, which Paul also talks about in great depth in Hebrews 11. Here Paul re-introduces this tenet, which he previously mentioned in chapter 1 verse 16-17 in regards to salvation for Jew and Greek, and he will go on to say a lot more about it at the end of the chapter and in subsequent chapters. The key element of the Abrahamic Covenant was belief, so the caveat he then attaches is really just the logical next step, because obviously without faith, the Abrahamic covenant and blessings were really null and void:

3 For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect?

The point here is very simple, although also somewhat complex. The simple point is that the Abrahamic covenant was very good, and the fact that some Israelites did not adhere to the covenant in no way detracts from the goodness of the covenant, nor the basic premise, that being a Jew was a wonderful blessing. The complex issue derives from the fact that Paul does not cite any particular example of faithlessness, which leaves it as an open-ended statement. He could be talking generally, about all Israelite unfaithfulness for the duration of the Old Covenant, he could be talking generally, about all Jewish unfaithfulness for the duration of the Old Covenant, or he could be talking about specific instances of unfaithfulness. The Greek for 'some' / 'some men' / 'certain men' is 'tis', and as I am not a Greek scholar, I am not sure of the semantics of this word. It can mean some of Israel, some of the Jews, or it could mean specific, certain Jews, certain Israelites, and hence be referring to particular moments in Israel's history. As the next sentence

uses the future tense, and therefore refers to the future judgement of these 'certain men', it implies specifically the men of Jesus' generation. However, as we have already seen, Paul builds his arguments with layers of meaning, so we need to keep up with exactly what he is referring to; as we have seen in chapters 1 and 2, Paul extrapolates from the behaviour of Israel in the wilderness to fill out the picture of the present state of Jewry.

If we go back to the Old Covenant, what God in fact did was to add the Horeb Covenant to the Abrahamic Covenant, (Galatians 3:19). If we go all the way back to the Israelites coming out of Egypt, we see in Exodus 16 God imposing rules on the collection and preservation of manna. The Israelites were moaning a lot, and being difficult, so God put them to the test:

4 Then said the Lord unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, **that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no.**

As it turned out, the Israelites failed the test; that is to say, they were not faithful. They were unable to obey these simple strictures, which showed God that their heart condition was not good, and that they were not fit for his purposes. So as we can see, God was very angry, that after all he had done to liberate Israel from Egyptian oppression, all he was met with was a wall of whingeing and whining, which was infantile, self-centred, and ultimately rebellious, and which indicated that Israel was not ready to serve God. And sure enough, when God gave them a task, they were unable to do it faithfully which fuelled God's anger:

27 And it came to pass, that there went out some of the people on the seventh day for to gather, and they found none. 28 And the Lord said unto Moses, **How long refuse ye to keep my commandments and my laws?**

And hence why God then imposed the entire Law on Israel; it was, as Paul says, a schoolteacher until they were ready for faith, until they had grown up - Galatians 3:

24 Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. 25 But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

The Law was really for faithless, disobedient men. So the certain faithless Jews (Israelites) Paul mentions could be this generation in the wilderness who were later disqualified from entering the Promised Land when their lack of faith culminated in a refusal to enter the land of milk and honey, coupled with the desire instead to nominate a Captain to take them back to Egypt. At which point God, once again, got extremely angry with their lack of faith:

11 And the Lord said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? **and how long will it be ere they believe me,** for all the signs which I have shewed among them?

So that generation was so faithless that God simply refused to let any of them, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, enter the land. The lack of faith of that generation disqualified them from receiving God's blessings, from entering the land of milk and honey. Where Paul has not explicitly stated what faithlessness he is referring to, he opens the door to any examples of Israelite lack of faith being implicit in what he says. The example given clearly illustrates his point, of how a lack of faith expunges the wonderful blessings that were by right the Israelite's, so is germane to Paul's argument. Beyond this, the old testament was a kind of template for events in the new, it is as Paul says, exemplary:

[1 Corinthians 10:11](#) These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.

So even if Paul is really talking more particularly about his generation, the typology of the generation in the wilderness remains highly relevant and instructive.

Obviously Israel was apostate throughout its lifespan, up until the point God de-covenanted the Northern Kingdom, but Judah was no different either. They were both serially unfaithful to God, Jeremiah 3:8:

[8](#) And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also.

Again, these all serve as examples to reinforce Paul's point: faithlessness resulted in things like banishment, foreign rule, excommunication, and so on. Furthermore the overall history of Israel proves the greater point that Paul has made, that no matter how faithless Israel was, God remained true to his promises. Indeed there were occasions where God wanted to wipe out all Israel in its entirety because they were so sinful, but nonetheless, from the inception of the Abrahamic Covenant, through to Christ's appearance, in spite of everything, in spite of the expulsion of 10 tribes from Israel for apostasy, in spite of God having to let foreign aggressors beat up Judah and turn it into a vassal state, in spite of people like Haman who wanted to ethnically cleanse the world of Jewry, God kept his promises. Israel remained intact and produced the Messiah.

As we go forward, we can see that the Paul has loaded his argument to deal with the present generation, the generation Christ called 'faithless and perverse' (Matthew 17:17).

[3](#) For what if some did not believe? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? [4](#) God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged.

Because Paul uses this combination of past and future tenses, his overall meaning then seems to be that all past Israelite apostasy is about to culminate in a future event. It is the same thing Christ

spoke about in Matthew 23:35:

[upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah](#)

A single judgement for multiple generational wrongs. (This is a complex subject, so I will simply leave it for now and append a further study at a later date.)

Of the present generation of unbelieving Jews, Paul is saying that their unbelief will not nullify God's faithfulness. Put simply, God has promised certain things, attached to which promises was the covenant, whose conditions included the curses for disobedience. God will do all he has mandated himself to do, good and bad, it is as simple as that. God does not lie, and he does not speak empty words, so when he promises or binds himself to do something by oath, he follows through. His punishments for disobedience, Deuteronomy 26, still stand, and are pending, an imminent future event at the time Paul is writing. Paul stresses the point: even if every single Israelite takes the same stance, (namely the belief that Jesus was not Christ), it makes them no less wrong, no more right; God is right, and faithful, and will follow through on what he has purposed and sworn to do, and in doing so he both rectifies the miscarriage of justice, whereby Christ had been found guilty of blasphemy by the Jews, and he upholds his integrity, and Jesus' integrity, because he is carrying out what he has promised to do under the Old Covenant, and what Jesus also warned the Jewish leaders would take place, namely a full exaction of the requisites of the Law (Matthew 5:17-18, Luke 16:17). In judging Jesus, the Jews had played God, and put God on trial; it is now incumbent on God, as the true Judge, to overturn that miscarriage of justice, and show the Jews who is the Judge, which is why he told Jesus to come and sit at his right hand until he has put his enemies under his feet. One of the Hebrew names for God, Elohim, means the Creator and Judge of the universe, another, Elohei Mishpat, (Isaiah 30:18), means the God of Justice. The fact that Paul references Psalm 51 in verse 4 is in itself significant. Psalm 51 is David's psalm of guilt after he had had Uriah the Hittite killed in order to purloin Bathsheba.

[4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,](#)

[and done what is evil in your sight,](#)

[so that you are justified in your sentence](#)

[and blameless when you pass judgment.](#)

The consequence of David's sin was that he brought God into disrepute amongst the heathen. Israel was supposed to be a beacon, and David, as God's representative and substitute, as King and Judge of Israel, the position formerly occupied by God himself, was supposed to reflect God's justice. The actual substance of David's sin though was that he had usurped God's position, which is why he confessed to having sinned against God, rather than Uriah. In all things David

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conferred with God, and was subject to God; however, when he decided he wanted Bathsheba he simply acted unilaterally, without consulting God, and so went over God's head. In effect, he had made himself God. If he wanted something, as God said, he only needed to have asked.

2 Samuel 12:8 And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.

David's sin was the same as the Prince Of Tyre's (Satan), he had tried to usurp God's authority, (Ezekiel 28):

2 Son of man, say unto the prince of Tyrus, Thus saith the Lord God; Because thine heart ('leb': mind) is lifted up, and thou hast said, I am a God, I sit in the seat of God, in the midst of the seas; yet thou art a man, and not God, though thou set thine heart ('leb': mind) as the heart ('leb': mind) of God:6 Therefore thus saith the Lord God; Because thou hast set thine heart ('leb': mind) as the heart ('leb': mind) of God;

Having had his authority usurped, God then needed to restore order with David, by putting him back under him. Paul is applying the same logic to the Jews; by judging Jesus they have inverted the divine order, of man under God, and God needs to rectify this, as a matter of extreme urgency.

At this point the imaginary unbelieving Jew retorts:

5 But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)

To which Paul replies:

6 By no means! For then how could God judge the world?

Which invites the response from the imaginary Jew:

7 But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?

Leading Paul to reply:

8 Then** why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), "Let us do evil so that good may come"? Their condemnation is deserved!

(V5) The Jew here takes Paul's proposition, that God is vindicated even by the actions of the faithless, and tries to turn faithlessness into a positive attribute, as if it is a form of service to God,

allowing God to show how just he is. On that basis he feels Jews should not be punished by God. (V6) Paul fulminates that this completely misses the point. It is the very act of punishing apostate Jewry by which God shows his justice. (V7) The Jew reiterates his position; the Jewish falsehood was that Jesus was not God, it was through this falsehood that Jesus was put on the cross, and glorified. So the Jew is claiming that he is part of the process, that he is doing a service to God and the Kingdom of God. (V8) To which Paul replies to the effect that this line of reasoning is totally nihilistic, and really what the Jew is proposing is to do evil as good might just accidentally come out of it. (As we can see in these exchanges, there is a tone - the imaginary Jew is quite indignant, Paul is not beyond being sarcastic). Paul also finds another group of people in his cross-hairs at this point, a group of people who have claimed that Christians also practice this brand of nihilism, and Paul roundly condemns them. Don Fortner *** says that this is a reference to those who say that Gospel of Grace is a licence to sin, which seems correct, unless there is some specific controversy Paul is referring to. (See Romans 6:1).

9 What then? are we better ('proeicho' - to hold oneself better before others) than they?

Paul has knocked down every defence the imaginary Jew has proposed for apostate Jews. Nothing they do outside of faith, outside of the Abrahamic Covenant, is of any worth. The Jew now arrives at his final defence:

“So what are you saying, that we Jews are special, that we are superior to all other races?”

The overall logic of the chapter so far is this: the Jew feels he performs a special function in the plans of God, (in particular, being the crucifier of God, which was part of God's plan). Because of this he feels he should be exempt from the harsh punishment that God is about to mete out on him; he was doing the work God needed him to do. Paul disallows this line of reasoning, and explains that God has set the terms of the agreement, the old covenant, and that the Jew needs to accept the fall-out; Paul also explains that good is good and evil is evil, and the Jew has simply behaved in an evil fashion, and needs to accept the consequences of this also. As the Jew (still) feels he is being judged unfairly, differently to other men, he then concludes that he is being judged differently because he is inherently different. So the only rationale he is left with is that he, the Jew, is a kind of special case; he must be better than other people because God is judging him to a much higher standard. (This is a line of reasoning that culminates in him believing he is genetically superior to others, which is a very deep-rooted pathology).

Back comes Paul's withering reply.

No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Greeks, that they are all under sin (hypo hamartia);

All Paul is saying is that Jews are the same as every other human being, they have the same flawed sinful Adamic make-up as the rest of mankind. The Jews are in the same boat as the

Greeks, and all other men; this is Paul being ironic, because clearly if the Jews proselytized non-Jews, they did not really see any difference between themselves and others. They are men, nothing more, nothing less, neither inherently better or worse than any other human being.

Paul then collates various old testament scriptures into a collage to illustrate his point:

10 As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:

11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

13 Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips:

14 Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness:

15 Their feet are swift to shed blood:

16 Destruction and misery are in their ways:

17 And the way of peace have they not known:

18 There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Paul has cut, pasted and overlaid several scriptures here, but the key scripture he uses is Isaiah 59. However he bookends it at the beginning with Psalm 53, (which is almost identical to Psalm 14), and Psalm 36 at the end. The scriptures depict an exceedingly sinful evil people, so Paul has reinforced his previous conclusion, that the Jews are Adamic sinful men like everyone else, with the full weight of scripture. It is interesting to note the way he compiles the scriptures. Psalms 53 and 14 do not identify the unrighteous body of people they describe. The Book of Isaiah is penned to the House of Judah, although the passage quoted is to the entire House Of Israel. It is as if Paul is conveying two messages; firstly that sinful people are sinful people, that is their category. So their governing class is sinfulness. Secondly however, he makes it clear that the sinful people in question here are Israelites, as per Isaiah. However, continuing the theme of verse 9, he selects a passage from Isaiah penned to all Israelites, rather than just the House of Judah, so as to ram home the point - he is seeing them as Israelites and not Jews in order to stress the rebuttal of the idea of Jewish exceptionalism; the Jews for instance looked down scornfully on their neighbours the Samaritans, who were a remnant of the House Of Israel. The overriding message is clear then; they are sinful men first and foremost, Jews/Israelites after that, and that sinfulness is the human condition, and the Jews are no less partakers of the human condition than anyone else.

So, Paul moves towards a conclusion.

19 Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

Before we can understand the rest of the chapter, we need to be absolutely clear as to how Paul divides the world here. When Christ came, he came for all mankind. So, were it not for Jewish intransigence and unbelief, the entire world would be under grace, under Christ's salvatory gospel. When Paul spoke to the Athenians on Mars Hill, (Acts 17), he made it quite clear that all men were now under judgement, that the times of God overlooking the Nations, (the Gentiles), were over.

30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: 31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

So once Christ had been resurrected, delivered the Great Commission to the apostles, (and personally explained the mystery of the Gospel to the Gentiles to Paul), then all nations, all mankind were under judgement, and all men needed to repent and call on Christ. The only people who were not under the New Covenant were the unbelieving Jews, (and Greek converts), who willingly remained under the Law. By denying Christ, they were forcing God to leave them under the judgement of the Old Covenant. Coming back to Romans, Paul is saying that the texts he has quoted apply only to those people under the Law, i.e. apostate Jews. (Maybe this is another reason why he makes it so densely referential, to show that he is speaking specifically to those people versed in the Old Testament). So the texts he has quoted are designed to apply the final rebuttal to the arguments of the defence, the archetypal imaginary Jew; those scriptures have shut the apostate Jew up. Now that Paul has silenced him, ('that every {apostate jewish} mouth may be stopped') he can say that all the world now can be lead up for judgement ('hypodikos' - hypo = under, dikos = judge, i.e. the court case is over and now the judge can sentence) by God. Whilst the Jew remained arguing his case, the case remained open. Paul has now closed it, and the Jew has been found guilty. Now entire whole world can be judged (and sentenced), because everyone else is automatically under the New Covenant and under the judgement of Christ, as per Romans 2:16.

20 Therefore ('dioti' - On this account) by ('ek' - of) the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

Paul is simply saying that the Law is designed to convict people, that is its real purpose. He has used it in what I call a court setting to settle the matter, and he is explaining that this is the core purpose of the Law, it is designed to show people their guilt. For that reason, he is saying it cannot be used by the defence, in one's defence. In the court setting God is the Prosecutor, the Law is

the charge sheet, and our advocate, our only Defence actually, is Jesus. (In actual fact no one can appeal to the Law in their defence, other than Jesus, as to break one part of the law means breaking it all; therefore to appeal to the law to justify yourself is a fool's errand - it is the Laws that convict you that are of relevance to God).

21 But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;

22 Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:

23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

24 Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;

26 To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

And here Paul gives a very complete explanation of the Christian Faith, which stands foursquare in contradistinction to Mosaic legalism. The Law set a standard of righteousness that only Christ could fulfil. Against Christ's righteousness we all stand as sinful men in rags, but by God's grace, we can have Christ's righteousness imputed to us.

27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded.

By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.

Nobody can boast about being better than anyone else because it is against the Law. "Which law?" Paul asks rhetorically, the Law of Faith he tells us. So under the rules of Faith, we cannot boast. What are the rules of faith? That Christ does all the work of salvation, and we do nothing.

28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

29 Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also:

30 Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.

31 Do we then make void ('katargeo' -deprive of force) the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we

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[establish the law.](#)

Did the law have no purpose? Absolutely not, when we understand how the Law showed Christ to be God, then we understand it had a very clear purpose.

*I will do a separate study on the Abrahamic Covenant, if this is unclear to anyone.

** My amendment to make it clearer

***http://donfortner.com/radio_notes/0842%20A%20Slanderous%20Report.htm