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In Defense of the Gospel, Part 1

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. ¹

Persecution and the Early Church

In the book of Acts we read of a rather interesting quirk in history.

Acts 8:1b, “And on that day [the day of Stephen’s martyrdom] a great persecution arose against the

¹ *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Romans 3:1–8). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”

You may not have considered this before, but did you know that the first persecution that the New Testament people of God encountered was NOT from the world, Rome, or the Pagan religious institutions of the day BUT from the very ones who identified themselves as “the people of God” the Jews? In fact in the beginning it was *Rome!* that protected the church from Jewish persecution! Speaking of Jerusalem:

Acts 21:30-32, “And all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul, they dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. And while they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. And at once he took along some soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.”

Now if you think about it, it’s quite understandable as to why the early church encountered persecution from the Jews. The New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament (Hebrews 1:1-2; Matthew 5:17-18), as such Christianity isn’t a new religion distinct from Judaism, but a realized Judaism. As such with the coming of Christ, redemptive history took a huge step forward leaving behind those Jews who were more devoted to their religion than God! As Christ put it:

Mark 2:22, “And no one puts new wine [the teaching of the New Covenant] into old wineskins [the theological system of Judaism at the time of Christ]; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and the skins *as well*; but *one puts* new wine into fresh wineskins.”

Accordingly, when the disciples of Christ began preaching, teaching, and ministering, there arose much confusion amongst Old Covenant Jews.

Romans 3, is an example of this confusion. In arguing that all, Gentile AND JEW, are sinful and therefore need the gospel, Paul leveled a strong indictment against the Judaism of his day! In essence he said that in spite of the legitimate privileges the Jew/the covenant child of God enjoyed as a member of the covenant community, they nevertheless would receive condemnation on account of their disobedience to God’s Law.

Now this understandably raised severe objections among Paul’s countrymen. We’re talking here about covenant children, members of the household of God! These are people who in other contexts would be labeled as Christians! How is it that they could be under God’s wrath? What about the Abrahamic covenant? The promises? God’s grace?

Romans 3 answers these questions. In Romans 3:1-8, Paul addresses three of the most common objections that the Jew would have raised to the gospel. We are going to deal only with the first objection that Paul addressed in defense of the gospel, the anticipated objection:

The Anticipated Objection

The anticipated objection is this: "then what advantage has the Jew?" (Romans 3:1)

Literally this reads, “what is the superabundance of blessing that belongs to the Jew?” This is an important question because in Romans 2:17-20 Paul lists many of the advantages in which many a Jew sought refuge, and then shows that these advantages are of *no value* when it came to God’s approval! Truly, while the covenant child enjoys many blessings from God that the Gentile does not, nevertheless these “advantages” do not save or protect them from God’s wrath.

Now think with me on this. If what Paul is teaching is true, that meant that in the end there really is no difference between the Jew and the Gentile. Both will suffer under the wrath of Almighty God. With this we might be tempted to conclude that the blessings granted on account of a covenant relationship with God are worthless! What good are they if in the end they don’t save us?

Now is that what Paul was teaching? Is that the result of the gospel? Before we answer this, notice Paul brings it one step further.

"Or what is the benefit of circumcision?" (Romans 3:1) Paul is literally saying, “what is the value or profit of circumcision?”

This also an important question because in Romans 2:25 Paul discusses circumcision and concludes that the rite was of *no benefit* if you broke the law. Now if this is true, this was a radical statement in Paul’s day. Think about it! In Genesis we have recorded for us the promise God made to Abraham.

Genesis 17:1-2, “Now when Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly.’”

An integral part of this promise concerned Abraham’s family/descendants.

Genesis 17:7-8, “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

From this we rightly conclude that to be a member of the covenant community (to be a Jew) and to receive circumcision (the sign of the entry point into this promise) brought a person into a special relationship with God!

- The child of a covenant family was to receive, at the earliest of age, special instruction about God and the promise, (Deuteronomy 6:4-7).
- The woman whose Jewish husband died was guaranteed protection and care from the body, (Deuteronomy 25:5).
- The Gentile who joined the family of God became subject to the ceremonial and judicial laws of the Old Testament which would provide for their prosperity and well-being, (Psalm 119; Genesis 17:12ff; Jeremiah 29:11).
- The descendants of Abraham, though they were rebellious and sinful, continued to receive God’s protective grace, (Psalm 106).
- To the faithful member of the covenant community, God would...
 - Prosper the work of their hands, (Deuteronomy 7:13).

- Bring them victory over their foes, (Deuteronomy 7:16).
- Provide for their physical needs, (Psalm 37:23-25).
- Bring deliverance from all fears, (Psalm 34:4-7).
- Give a life that would be rich and satisfied, (Deuteronomy 11:15).

Read the Psalter, and everywhere you see a benefit in being God's people you have another example of the advantage of being a Jew. Truly on the basis of God's Word, being part of the covenant community and receiving circumcision brought many advantages that no Gentile ever received!

That is why in the mind of the Jew Paul's teaching in this epistle was inconsistent with God's character and the acknowledged Biblical privileges of being His people! And that is why Romans 3 is not the only place where Paul was confronted with the objection. Recall what the apostles told Paul:

Acts 21:21, "And they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs."

When Paul said that circumcision didn't guarantee a person's salvation, that was understood by his countrymen as saying the rite was worthless! The mob said this of Paul:

Acts 21:28a, "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people, and the Law..."

And thus to the Jew, the message of the Gospel was tantamount either to saying that the Old Testament was false or that God was not faithful in carrying out His promises. Now anticipating this objection, Paul gave a definitive response.

The Disciple's Response

Romans 3:2, "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect."

This phrase indicates a many-sided advantage. The person who was a member of the covenant community and who had received circumcision was indeed privy to countless benefits! As we've already seen in part:

- They became the recipients of God's special and gracious dealings. (Psalm 147:20)
- They received God's protecting and preserving grace. (Isaiah 5:1-4)
- They become God's very own possession. (Exodus 19:6)
- They received God's love. (Deuteronomy 10:14-15)

Romans 9:4, 5, "...to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises... from whom is the Christ according to the flesh..."

Truly though the covenant child/the Jew will be judged according to his works (Romans 2:6, 12-13), he

nevertheless has a great advantage in the here and now in being a member of the covenant community of God! Thus, being a Jew meant receiving many advantages that the Gentile did not have! So understand, the gospel does not abrogate the benefits housed in the Abrahamic covenant. In fact if there were any question, Paul gives an example of the chief benefit granted to all in the household of God.

Romans 3:2, " first of all."

The language here makes it sound as though Paul is going to give a list. But he clearly doesn't. There is no "second" or "third." In fact, Paul won't return to the benefits that are housed in God's Kingdom until Romans 8. In view of this, a better translation here would be "chiefly" or "as of top priority." And so speaking of his countrymen Paul continued:

Romans 3:2, "as of top priority they were entrusted."

The word for "entrusted" is the usual word for believe. Yet in the passive it is used in the sense of "entrust as a stewardship." For example, Paul speaking of preaching says this:

1 Corinthians 9:17, "For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me."

1 Thessalonians 2:4, "But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel..."

Galatians 2:7, "But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised."

From these passages we get the nuance of this word. To be "entrusted with" something is to be given it as a stewardship or a task. So on account of the covenant, the covenant child of God has been given a stewardship involving a great blessing. Notice, first of all [the greatest and most amazing blessing given to the member of the household of God is], that they were entrusted [as a stewardship] with the oracles of God. (Romans 3:2)

In the Greek world, it was believed that in certain places and at certain times the gods were known to utter short sayings or oracles (and so we read of the Oracle of Delphi). As time passed these "short sayings" came to be referred to as "divine sayings." Accordingly in Paul's day "an oracle" was understood to be the very words of a god. In a Biblical setting it would have referred to the utterance of Yahweh, as if God Himself were speaking. And it is this phrase that Paul used here with the significance that in the Bible we have NOT

- The words of "inspired" men; as in neo-orthodoxy
- The interpretation of holy men; as in liberalism.

BUT the unadulterated word of God Himself! Think of it! When Moses and the people of God approached Mount Sinai, the earth shook at the voice of God. It pleased the Lord to speak to His people directly. Yet in the terror of the moment, God's people requested that Moses receive the word of God Himself and so pass it on to them.

That is exactly what happened and so began the office and the ministry of prophet.

Exodus 20:18-21, “And all the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.’ And Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.’ So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God *was*.”

Would you notice from this text that which distinguishes the message of a prophet from the literal message of God is NOT the content, BUT the glory! When God speaks, the word is accompanied by the awesome glory of God. When a prophet speaks, the word is accompanied by the manageable presence of a finite human being. In both cases the word/message did not change, just the method whereby it was communicated!

From this we see that to a covenant child of God, the Lord entrusts NOT a translation or a synopsis of a message, BUT the unadulterated Word of Almighty God! Do you understand the significance of this? In the ancient world messages from the gods were a highly sought after treasure. It was rare and could only be found in drug induced trances or “holy men.” In contrast, God’s people received this massive deposit from God which was no less God’s word than the tablets of stone upon which the Lord wrote in Exodus 31:18!

Now get this; on account of the covenant we have been “entrusted” with this massive deposit. And so as God’s people were leaving behind the wilderness and about to enter the Promised Land and so an uncertain future, Moses encouraged them:

Deuteronomy 29:29, “The secret things [concerning the future] belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed [the word of God] belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.”

Truly, one of the most precious gifts given to the child of God from God is the Word of God! It properly is the glory and delight of the Christian. And so we read this:

Psalms 119:97, “O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day.”

Speaking of the individual statements found in God’s word, David wrote this:

Psalms 19:10-11, “They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

What a blessing then the covenant child, the member of the household of God, received! Above and beyond everything else, they received in their care the “oracles of God” His Word! God’s word:

- Contains God’s mind and will for their life, (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

- Is totally sufficient for their needs, (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- Is infallible in its totality, (Psalm 19:7).
- Is inerrant in its parts, (Proverbs 30:5-6).
- Is authoritative and final, (Psalm 119:89).
- Would accomplish what it promised, (Isaiah 55:11).

God's Word is that which is able to:

- Give Rebirth, (1 Peter 1:23).
- Grant Salvation, (2 Timothy 3:15).
- Generate Spiritual Growth, (1 Peter 2:2).
- Build them up,(Acts 20:32).
- Make them mature in Christ,(2 Timothy 3:17b).
- Keep them from error, (2 Timothy 4:2-4).
- Make them holy, (John 17:17).

In light of all of this we ask, “Does the Gospel therefore contradict the clear teaching of the Old Testament that said that being a member of the covenant community made you privy to all sorts of benefits?” Absolutely not! Far from being of no advantage, being a Jew or a covenant child brought with it many advantages; chief of which was the stewardship of the word of God! Therefore, Paul is not saying that membership in a household of faith is pointless and vain. Rather, his point is that contrary to what the Jew thought, these benefits:

- Did not save you!
- Could not satisfy the divine standard of righteousness demanded by the Covenant of Works!

In fact and as we have seen, far from securing God’s approval, the benefits the Jew enjoyed on account of the Abrahamic Covenant added to their responsibility! As it related to the word, they now had the responsibility to...

- Preserve it!
- Teach it!
- Know it!
- AND UPHOLD!

And it was here that they stumbled. Jesus said this:

Matthew 23:2-3, “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses [this is the chair of teaching]; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them.”

The Hebrew writer speaking of the Jews of his day said this:

Hebrews 10:26-27, “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.”

Thus, as far as to the first objection that was raised by the Jew to the gospel, Paul emphatically says that the Gospel does not abrogate the benefits of the Promise! Indeed far from NOT receiving any advantage for being a Jew or being circumcised, the Old Testament child of God received much by way of blessing, chief of which was the stewardship of the Word of God.

Now as we have looked at this passage resist the urge of taking this text in reference to a group of people who lived 2,000 years ago. If you are a member of the household of faith, then you are a realized Jew! In the words of Scripture, you are...

- The true circumcision.
- A chosen race.
- A royal priesthood.
- A holy nation.
- A people for God's own possession.
- The people of God.

All expressions used in the Old Testament of the Jew which in the New Testament are used of all in Christ (Philippians 3:3; 1 Peter 2:9-10)! Thus, let us realize that if the "Old Testament people of God" fell into the error of misusing or mistaking the benefits granted the believer on account of the Covenant, then what do you suppose the tendency will be in your own life? The Hebrew writer drew this conclusion after detailing a portion of the sordid history of God's people in the Old Testament:

Hebrews 4:1, "Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it."

Listen! The history of the people of God in the Old Testament is a history of apostasy and rebellion against God. The root of this rebellion sprung from a rejection of the word of God given by God to the people of God through the prophets. Listen to the indictment Christ leveled against the Jews:

Luke 11:48-52a, "Consequently, you are witnesses and approve the deeds of your fathers; because it was they who killed [the prophets], and you build *their* tombs. For this reason also the wisdom of God said, 'I will send to them prophets and apostles, and *some* of them they will kill and *some* they will persecute, in order that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.' Woe to you lawyers! [of which we all have become in Christ] For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter in yourselves..."

Christian I hope you see that we have in our possession "the key of knowledge." And yet look around and what do you see? Men and women who cherish this deposit? Sadly it is just the opposite. Today, amazingly and shockingly few in the body of Christ read it or give attention to it. Most of us have not taken the time to understand it nor have we submitted to its teaching. Our churches are Biblically and theologically illiterate and so few care! In fact, get this; speaking of the Bible, what Satan took from the child of God through persecution 500 years ago, modern Christians have willingly forfeited without so much as even a battle!"

Though 2,000 years separate us from the Jews of Christ's day, we have become their children as we have neglected the word of God! You say, what ought we to do? How do we prove faithful to this stewardship?

First we need to realize that the word of God was given for multiple reasons; so that we might:

- Mature in our relationship with God, (2 Timothy 3:17).
- Be rebuked when we go astray, (Psalm 19:11).
- Be trained in righteous living, (2 Timothy 3:16).
- Be sustained in our walks, (Isaiah 50:4).
- Know joy, (Jeremiah 15:16).
- But fundamentally, that we might believe and so trust in Christ.

John 20:30-31, "Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

John tells us the reason he penned his gospel; that we might be brought to the place of trust and dependence upon the Lord. And this is huge! As sinners, our most unflattering disposition is an independency from God. Did you know that? This is what led Adam and Eve in their rebellion against God in the garden.

This is what keeps people from abandoning their self-trust and self-reliance and so coming to the Lord. Truly the most fundamental sin from which we must ever and always repent is our autonomy/independency! To cling to this and yet profess a love for God and His kingdom is a contradiction. And so we behold the warning of the Hebrew writer:

Hebrews 4:2, "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard."

The focus of Christianity and so this revelation from God is the creation of a people who depend upon Christ and His cross in and through all things. Indeed! To come to the word and walk away neglecting this calling is to fail when it comes to the stewardship of the word. I'll say it again. If in your response to the word of God you are not led to a greater dependence upon Christ, you have not profited from it no matter how much you may have learned or how greatly you may have been inspired!

Hebrews 4:2, "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard."

In all our study we are after a greater contempt for and distrust of self and so a greater reliance upon Christ. That is how we prove good stewards of this most important of all the benefits granted in Christ!

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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