

PROLOGUE TO PRISON

Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

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- 1954 -

Cowman Publishing Company, Inc. California

Chapter Six -

The Faithfulness of GOD

Romans 3:1-8

What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.

For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? 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. But if our unrighteousness commend the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance? (I speak as a man) God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world? For if the truth of God hath more abounded through my lie unto his glory; why yet am I also judged as a sinner? And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just."

Two questions the Apostle anticipates in the light of the strong condemnation of the Jew in Chapter 2. First, what advantage has the Jew? If what Paul says is true, then what is the difference between the Jew and the Gentile? What is the value of being a Jew? What advantage does he have, and what profit is there in circumcision? Perhaps as we think about these two questions, we can appreciate just a little bit the radical, revolutionary impact of Paul's teaching upon Jewish complacency. Paul himself had been through it; had he not taken his religion more seriously than his contemporaries? Had he not boasted that if any other could be proud of his achievements, he more? Surely the Apostle Paul had felt the blasting power of the truth against his own personal complacency and pride and stubborn zeal.

The Jews did not feel they were to be dealt with as other men. GOD had chosen them as the covenant people of Abraham, and insights into their attitude abound in the New Testament as, for example, when John the Baptist began his public ministry with the message, "**Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**" One can almost hear the Jews saying to John, "Of what must we repent, we are the children of Abraham?" John replies, "**think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham**" (Matthew 3:9). There is a basic truth intimated here; namely, that it is easier for GOD to make a man out of a stone than to bring a man to

repentance.

It is easier for GOD to create a man than to change his heart. In the words of a popular song, "It took a miracle" to hang the stars in place, but the greatest miracle is the power of GOD which moves a rebellious and unrepentant heart to conversion. On another occasion, when JESUS was having one of his verbal encounters with the Pharisees (John 8), they boasted, "**We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man**" (verse 33). It was a favorite saying of the Jews that all Israel hath a part in eternal life.

Justin Martyr wrote, "They supposed that to them universally who are of Israel or the seed of Abraham, no matter how sinful and disobedient to GOD they may be, that the eternal kingdom shall be given to them." Strange as this attitude may seem, it has its modern counterpart among us, as we shall see.

Paul begins to answer (verse 2) and herein is a graphic reminder that this is not a theological treatise but a letter, for Paul barely begins to answer the two questions he raises when apparently he gets sidetracked by a more important idea which forces itself upon him and with which he is constrained to deal. He does not return to his answer until chapter 9. For this reason one should not be too discouraged when trying to outline Paul's epistles that they do not always fall into neat and orderly form. These are letters, and there are spontaneity and the element of impulse which we see so clearly in this passage.

Raising two questions which he knows will occur to the Jew, he answers, "**Much every way.**" That is, there is great advantage to the Jew; there is great profit in circumcision, in every way, chiefly, or to begin with, "**because that unto them were committed the oracles of God,**" and that is the end of his answer until chapter 9. The Jews were entrusted with the oracles of GOD, and the word is probably used here, not in a limited sense as, for example, the commandments but in the broadest sense, referring to all the writings or the words of GOD, inclusive of the promise to Abraham, the Decalogue given to Moses, and the writing and preaching of the prophets.

Then the Apostle Paul engages a large question, a theological and historical problem, which he himself must have pondered deeply and wrestled with often because of his strong conviction as a Jew. He too would have regarded the Jews as immune to the judgments of GOD. He too would have believed with all his heart that they were a peculiar people for a peculiar place in the future. Following his conversion on the road to Damascus, while on the backside of the desert for three years, he "**conferred not with flesh and blood,**" (Galatians 1:16) he must often have faced this apparent contradiction. In view of the teaching of the Old Testament, the promise that GOD gave to Abraham, the law which GOD gave to Moses, and the whole Old Testament economy flowing out of these two things, the promise and the law, with all the teaching and writing of the prophets, if Israel failed, does this constitute GOD's failure? Has the Old Testament failed? Has somehow GOD's plan in history been thwarted?

As a matter of fact, long before Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, the SPIRIT of GOD was undoubtedly burning conviction deeply into his heart about this, and it must have been one of the imponderables which made it difficult for him to acknowledge CHRIST as his MESSIAH.

Peter faced this when the SPIRIT of GOD directed him to go to Cornelius, the big stubborn question: Does the admission of the Gentiles to the MESSIAH, if JESUS be the MESSIAH, and the rejection of the Jews, if they will not accept JESUS, constitute the failure of the Old Covenant? What an overwhelming prospect, the failure of GOD! Everything we can say critically of the Pharisees to the contrary notwithstanding, this would pose a perplexing dilemma, not easily resolved. Is everything which I have believed wrong?

In Paul's day Rome, in order to maintain peace within its borders, was tolerant of the worship of any GOD; nevertheless, the Romans were greatly intolerant of Jewish monotheism* which, due to Greek and Roman polytheism**, was looked on as atheism***. The strength of Jewish monotheism rested with Jewish destiny.

"Paul's considered resolution of this problem is very simple, very explicit, very dogmatic. He simply states, **"let God be true, but every man a liar."** The idea of GOD failing is preposterous, intolerable. He illustrates it with the 51st Psalm, in which King David, confessing his own grievous sin, prays, **"Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest."** In such crucial days we need to remember this answer of Paul's, the absolute dependability of GOD, the absolute faithfulness of GOD, the absolute integrity of GOD; no matter what is happening in history.

* *monotheism - Belief in one true GOD.*

** *polytheism - Belief in many gods.*

*** *atheism - Belief in no GOD.*

Regardless of what happens to me personally, however circumstances may converge upon my life to seem to destroy me, let GOD be true! If GOD is not true, then who, what can be trusted? The very foundations are removed! Paul's answer is exceedingly realistic and very practical: **"Let GOD be true, but every man a liar."** Job concluded likewise, though in a different way, when he said, **"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him"** (13:15).

Then comes a second thought based on the Jewish propensity to rationalize his position, thereby justifying himself; and Paul anticipates another question, "Well, if our failure glorifies GOD, if our unrighteousness commends the righteousness of GOD, is GOD then not unjust to chasten us, to judge us for this?" Paul says parenthetically (verse 5), **"I speak as a man,"** by which he means he is employing the reasoning of some regarding this, and then he utters the strongest negative in the Bible, **"God forbid!"** For he reasons, if this were true, how could GOD judge anybody?

For example, how could He judge the Gentiles? If the evil of man glorifies GOD, and He is thereby unjust in judging men, who could be judged? The argument continues in verses 7 and 8, **"For if the truth of God hath more abounded through my lie unto his glory; why yet am I also judged as a sinner? And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come?"** Here we have an early illustration of modern pragmatism, the end justifies the means. Some people apparently slanderously charge that Paul is teaching this. His answer to the accusation is simply, "they deserve damnation!"

The end does not justify the means, ever, but this process of rationalization in order to self-justification is a very familiar human practice. In our own nation, for instance, what a great nation we are, how much we have done for the world! We are a Christian nation, some insist. If so, it is only nominal. We imprint our money, "In GOD We Trust." Look at the millions of dollars we are giving away to help rehabilitate the nations of the world, the food that we are sending. Did not the idea of "CARE" originate in the United States of America? What good people we are! It can't happen here, it can't happen here! Surely GOD is on our side! Surely GOD is with us! The Germans in two world wars had the same idea when they engraved on the belt buckles of their army uniforms, "Gott mit uns." It is seen in the individual who refuses to acknowledge his sin while busily justifying himself on the basis of good works.

It is personified in the alcoholic. How many I have seen whose lives are broken, yet they will not admit they are alcoholics. Here is an intelligent young man, a medical doctor, who every evening comes home, goes immediately to the refrigerator, takes out a can of beer, then another, and another, and another; lapsing into drunken sleep, he wakes up sober, goes back to the job in the morning, then comes home to go through the same pathetic routine. As we talked not long ago, he insisted, "My wife thinks I am an alcoholic, but I'm not!" Or another, with a bottle of cheap wine, all the while we talked he would interrupt his conversation as he stuck the long neck of that bottle deep down in his throat yet stubbornly declared, "I'm not an alcoholic!"

But let us not make a scapegoat of the alcoholic, for the same basic deceit and escapism is in the man who says, "I'm not a sinner!"

John touches the heart of this self-deception in the first chapter of his first epistle when he says, **"God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** (I John 1:5-9).

How many people deprive themselves of the blessings of GOD, the blessings of forgiveness and cleansing because they rationalize and justify self instead of acknowledging their sin, walking in the light and receiving GOD's forgiveness and cleansing! How many Christians allow their fellowship to be broken with those about them because they will not acknowledge their own sin! They may blame everybody else but never themselves. That is alcoholism in essence; only the form is different! How quick we are to rationalize and justify our sin.

I suppose that this is the most amazing phenomenon in a pastor's study when he is counseling - the ability of men to turn evil into a positive good by some twist in their reasoning. Of course we see the ultimate of this in Communism today, in Khrushchev, who calls disorder order; for whom a lie is the truth, for whom peace is war. That is its ultimate expression, but it is in everyone of us. What delight to walk in the light and quit trying to build these self-deceiving defenses, but rather let them be destroyed. The defensive person is so obvious, so transparent, so quick to blame others when, if he admitted his need, his failure, his sin, the grace of CHRIST could flow in with its healing and cleansing and renewal. Very practical, isn't it?

In the final analysis, the real trouble with the Jew was the fact that he had accepted the privilege implicit in the oracles of GOD but had rejected the corresponding responsibility, and in so doing he had forfeited the privilege. He had received a promise through Abraham which he readily accepted, but he had also been given the Ten Commandments, and he was expected to obey them. Circumcision was the symbol of his faith in the promise of GOD to Abraham; obedience should have been his response to the Commandments which GOD gave through Moses.

Actually, these are the two basic elements in real belief: trust in GOD's promise, obedience to GOD's law. Where there is not obedience, there is not belief in the Biblical sense; and this is true today in the Church as it was in Israel in Paul's day.

We sing the song,

"trust and obey, for there is no other way
To be happy in JESUS but to trust and obey."

We have received all of the blessings and the benefits that are implicit in the Gospel of JESUS CHRIST, but have we assumed the obligations as well? If we have not, then we repudiate the benefit. This is inevitable. We receive the gift of freedom in our wonderful country; what are we doing about it? We enjoy all of the blessings that are part of our Western way of life. What are we doing to preserve it? We are enjoying all the privileges; are we letting someone else assume the responsibility? If we do, it is inevitable that we will lose those privileges by default, which is exactly what is happening in our modern world.

We still enjoy the benefits of the Hebrew-Christian tradition which gave us our splendid culture, but many of us are ignoring or rejecting the message of the Word of GOD which produced that culture. We are like the Jew of the first century. The same process which took place in Israel through the years from Abraham to CHRIST has been taking place in our world and in the Church from JESUS CHRIST to the present day!

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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