

## BIBLE STUDY: ROMANS #3

Scripture of Lesson: Romans 3: 1~31

### 1. Israel's violation of God's trust: v. 1~8

Paul confesses as an Israeli that his own people, though entrusted by God the Scripture [v. 2] and the law, failed to live up to the trust. Peter stated that all Scripture had been written through inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

*"for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."  
[II Peter 1: 21]*

Jesus made remarkable prophecies regarding the Scripture:

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. [Mark 13: 31]*

*And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail.[Luke 16:17]*

As a fulfillment of His prophecies the Scripture has been well preserved. The Hebrew people has done their duty of safeguarding the Scripture over the centuries. God has moved the hearts of a few faithful people in each generation to safeguard the Scripture rolls so that the Scripture as a whole is available to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A good example is the Dead Sea scrolls imprinted on copper sheets by the Essences group in the first century.

However, Paul declares that God's vengeance for the unfaithfulness of Israel has been from His righteous judgment [v. 5]. The people of Israel, although they were entrusted with the law and the Scripture by God, chose to be unfaithful and disloyal to God. Paul was being honest and open to make this declaration to the readers in Rome, many of who were Jews, very likely. When we read this declaration today and think of all the suffering and persecution that the Jewish people have gone through the first century, can we say their suffering has been due to their unfaithfulness and God has taken acts of vengeance against it? If ever such an interpretation could be made, it can only be made by a Jewish Rabbi or biblical scholar and not by Christian leaders or scholars because it would be tantamount to a confession of their own people's sinfulness and unfaithfulness. Compared against the gross acts of injustice done against the Jewish people over the centuries by so-called Christian peoples in Europe and the Moslems in the Middle East, no non-Jewish could dare to make such a verdict and this matter should be left to the Jews to decide.

No matter what suffering and persecution that the Jewish people might have endured in the past, Paul declares that God's judgment is just [v. 5-6]. This confession, which can be made by both Jews and non-Jews, that all suffering and seemingly unexplainable hardships and pains that we have endured in our lives have been allowed to come to us because God willed. We had to endure them because the righteous God willed them to train and mold us out of His love for us. What great faith this is! When Abraham was called to offer his only son Isaac on Mt. Moriah, he obeyed knowing that God had blessed him and this was one of the ways God would bless him, although he could not then understand why. Often we stumble at the gate of 'why.' Our human nature demands explanations before we obey.

*Discussion topic: Have you failed to keep your vow/pledge to God and yet experienced His mercy and forgiveness? Please share such experiences with the group.*

## **2. We are all sinners before God: v. 9~19**

In spite of the privilege of having the covenant of God together with His promises, the examples of their faithful forefathers, the powerful evidence of miracles performed through their leaders and the Mosaic law including the Ten Commandments given to them through Moses, and the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit to help them, the people of Israel remained sinners before God. Here, Paul cites a number of OT verses that confess and lament that all Israel came short and are sinners before God:

*“There is none righteous, no, not one;  
There is none who understands;  
There is none who seeks after God.  
They have all turned aside;  
They have together become unprofitable;  
There is none who does good, no, not one.”  
“Their throat is an open tomb;  
With their tongues they have practiced deceit”;  
“The poison of asps is under their lips”;  
“Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.”  
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
Destruction and misery are in their ways;  
And the way of peace they have not known.”  
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.” [Romans 3: 10-18]*

In these verses sin is expressed in the understanding, thoughts, loyalty, speech, violence, and arrogance towards God. What about our conditions today? Do we believe that we are righteous before God because we do not fall into any of these categories? Let us remember that people can fit these descriptions when they are outside of God, do not have God in their lives, minds and hearts. Sin is inherently the state of being without a spiritual relationship with God. Unless we hear the gospel of Christ and become converted/ born again as children of God, we cannot claim God is our Lord and King. We are outside of God’s covenant and salvation plan. In such a state, we are sinners. Unless we understand this thoroughly, deeply in our hearts, we cannot come to God in a true spirit of repentance. And our coming will not be acceptable to God.

*Discussion topic: What is the most grievous sin before God in the modern Christian world such as in America? What can we do about it?*

## **3. Paul’s understanding of God’s salvation for men – salvation by grace only: v. 20-26**

Paul, who used to be a Pharisee who emphasized strict compliance to the do’s and don’ts established to bring the Jewish nation into God’s favor, now says that compliance of the law does not bring salvation. Do we have any long-held beliefs on salvation that need examination in light of the Scripture?

Partly due to the great emphasis on loyalty and obedience to God's authority and the law during the Old Testament days and as a way to bring the people of Israel back into God's favor the Pharisees came to devise hundreds of legalistic do's and don'ts that the people had to follow and taught them so. Jesus saw through their fallacy and hypocrisy in that the Pharisee doctrine and practice neglected the weightier matters of 'heart change' so that they criticized his healing of those with infirmities based on their emphasis on the rule of Sabbath keeping; they considered Jesus not the Messiah because to their eyes He was ignoring their doctrine; and they failed to accept the teachings of the Son of God as their ancestors had failed to listen to God's pleas of heart service to Him in the past centuries. Saul, the former Paul, was a loyal follower of this Pharisee doctrine. Thus, Saul firmly believed that the followers of Jesus was a dangerous sect that had to be eliminated from the Jewish society because the teachings of Jesus would alienate the people from God's favor and the Jesus movement was dangerous politically due to their loyalty to a lowly Galilean preacher not accepted by the Jewish leadership.

As we read this third chapter of Romans, however, we become keenly aware that Paul's understanding on God's salvation has changed fundamentally. Whereas he used to believe in the works of adhering to the Pharisaic legalistic codes for attaining God's favor and approval, now he believes that the salvation comes to us through the grace of God only. Whereas he used to pride in the faithful performance as a well-trained Pharisee, rising rapidly in the ranks of the young religious leaders of the Jewish society, he now sees no place of works before God for bragging or presenting as contributing to the amazing grace that God alone extends to the humanity. Whereas he used to feel himself fully justified based on the Mosaic Law, hence before God, he now says we are all sinners, with or without the law, unless we are brought into reconciliation with God through faith in Christ Jesus. He now sees that all of the Old Testament law and prophets point to this lowly Christ who had come as a humble carpenter's son in Galilee and gave Himself up willingly as the sacrificial lamb through whose sacrifice we humans are made 'right' with God. What a transformation from the former Pharisee Saul to the lowly Christian missionary who patterned his life after His Lord Jesus, who was a humble roving preacher, dedicated to bringing the good news of the gospel to the dying humanity!

*Discussion topic: Do we truthfully believe that God has given salvation free, without requiring good works from us, totally because of the sacrifice by His Son on Calvary? What inhibiting factors are there that prevents us from believing it 100%? Share your experiences of coming to this correct understanding about salvation.*

#### **4. One God both to the Jew and the Gentile: v. 27~31**

Paul's theology on God's salvation as given to men by His grace through our confessed belief in Jesus Christ is clearly expressed in this chapter. No Jews possess extra merit before God because of being a Jew, nor can he boast of the Mosaic Law [v. 27]. We are made right (justified) before God by God's grace alone, not because of our deeds of the law or good works [v. 28]. Accordingly, Paul is here repudiating the belief of the Judaists, who believed that salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone was not sufficient but the believers needed to comply with the requirements of the Mosaic Law because God had given it to the people of Israel as a covenant in the wilderness. However, Paul's interpretation was that, since the law presented no particular advantage to believers in the matter of salvation, the Gentiles were not required to comply with the Mosaic Law requirements. Jesus Christ paid the price for our sins and fulfilled all requirements of the law to enable all

repentant persons to come to God through Him and be saved, regardless whether they are of circumcision or non-circumcision [v. 30]. God is God of not only the Jews but of the Gentiles [v. 29].

What liberation this clear theology of Paul brought to the Gentile Christians of the first century! The doctrinal debate on compliance of the Judaic traditions ended right here. So, here is a distinct contribution of Paul's letter to the Romans to the Christian community in the early church period. And we can see why God saw a potential in Paul as a useful vessel for His great evangelical work. Although Peter was a leader amongst the apostles in presiding over the evangelical work and church governance, apostle Paul's ministry was essential in settling some of the theological issues of the period so that dissensions and disputes in the church could be quieted and the church could remain unified both in doctrine and in spirit.

Christians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should apply the lesson to today's issues in the church. There is still the same debate among Christian denominations as to the role/ relevance of good works for salvation. Notably the Catholic Church still teaches its believers that good works are essential to their salvation. The definition of good works has, of course, departed from compliance to the Judaic traditions and legalistic stipulations, and been changed to cover acts of charity for the poor and the needy, evangelical efforts of all levels, but also contributions to the church. A number of protestant churches also do not clearly proclaim 'salvation by grace alone' doctrine and tend to be hazy on this doctrine by saying good works is also important. Works is important in defining the life of a saved Christian. Our rewards will depend on our works. However, our salvation is by God's grace only. Church should rightly encourage its believers to be diligent in good works but not as a foundational requirement for salvation but rather as a way of demonstrating our gratitude for God's gift of salvation and our love of God as channeled towards our neighbors.

Let us praise God for His amazing grace and love towards us! Let us sing of His profound love that penetrates our worst state of sinfulness and shatters its hold on our souls! And let us give honor and glory to the Son of God who was willing to suffer on the cross to make possible God's amazing plan of human salvation. He is waiting for us even today to come to Him and to enjoy the true 'shalom' with Him in God's eternal kingdom that is here now and in heaven in eternity.

**Greek terms in the chapter:**

**Grace [*charis*]:** the state of kindness and favor toward someone, often with emphasis on a benefit given to the object.

**Justified [*dikaioō*]:** to justify, vindicate, declare righteous, to put someone in a proper relationship with another, usually referring to God's relationship with humankind, implying a proper legal or moral relationship.

**Takeaway from this chapter:**

1. We are all sinners before God unless we become justified before God.
2. God has made the provision for all humans to become reconciled/ justified with him through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the sacrificial Lamb of God. This provision comes free from God's grace and is not based on any work of humans.