

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 50

Romans – Part Three Salvation: Old and New Chapters 3:21- 5:21

I. BACKGROUND

Up to this point, we have understood the situation at Rome as one of identity. The Jews likely started the church, but Emperor Claudius later expelled them from Rome. Once the Jews were gone from the church, the Gentiles were left responsible and in full control. Later, the Jews returned. We can understand how issues of identity might arise. Who was the church really “for?” Was the church Jewish, with Gentiles allowed in by a merciful God and understanding Jews? Were the Jews actually rejected by God? Was that why the Gentiles were given the church with only a few Jews coming into it? (*See Lesson 1*).

In lesson 2, Paul prepares to answer these identity questions by starting, in a very real sense, at the beginning. Paul takes Jew and Gentile and explains how each group stands before God when they stand without Jesus Christ and his righteousness. Paul grants that the Jews had the Law, the very words of God, but that alone never gave the Jews righteousness. In fact, it did the opposite. It showed the Jews as sinners who could never live justly before God. It showed the Jews sinners worthy of condemnation.

The Gentiles, on the other hand, had no excuses either. The Gentiles could not rely on the failure of God to give them the Law as their justification. In fact, Paul points out that the Gentiles had evidence of God and his righteousness within themselves and the world around them. The Gentiles did not seek God out of that revelation and innate awareness. Instead, the Gentiles took a course of sin, debauchery, and idolatry. With the revelation the Gentiles had, the Gentiles could see their spiral into even greater sin as the consequence of the defiant decisions.

Paul summarizes the condition of mankind together, both Jew and Gentile. There are none who do righteousness or righteous deeds – not even one. By God’s principles of Judgment, if there were any who were righteous throughout their life (persistently), then there is eternal life for such a person. Any who fail, however (read that “all mankind”), inherit God’s wrath and anger.

We then briefly looked at Romans 3:21, where Paul speaks of an alternate righteousness. We pick up the study there this week and go through chapter 5 as Paul explains this salvation to all who believe, Jew and Gentile alike.

II. THE TEXT

Understanding Chapters 1 through 3:20 as Paul has written, we are a desperate people, doomed to the anger and wrath of a righteous God when we seek him on the basis of our deeds and choices in life. If Romans ended there – indeed, if human history ended there – all would be doomed before God and life would be pointless. But, Romans does not end there and neither did human history! God has made known a righteousness that he offers that is not based on how we live, but on works of law. This is a righteousness now known which the Old Testament (the Law and the Prophets) had testified about. This is a righteousness that comes from faith (trust) in Jesus Christ. It is a righteousness to all who have faith, whether Jew or Gentile. There is no difference in human genetics or race. Everyone has sinned. Everyone has missed the mark. Everyone has missed God’s glorious holiness. So, God has freely given us the justification through the redemption of Jesus dying in our stead (3:21-24).

Before we go much further, we need to address a few of the words Paul is using. They are intricate to understanding his points and intricate to understanding the work of God.

A. *“Faith” and “Believe”*

These two words are from the same basic Greek word, πιστεω (pisteuo). The word means faith or trust when used as a noun. In the verb form, it means believe or trust. Our English “faith” and “belief” still retain some sense of the element of trust, but often that is lost.¹ Also, our English can simply mean a mental agreement without any inference of trust. We can speak of someone believing in God, even though they refuse to trust him or relate to him in any way. This is more consistent with the Hebrew concept of faith/believe. Later, we will read in the letter of James that in this sense (the Jewish sense of “believe”), this type of faith is useless for

¹ Consider the expression, “Don’t you believe in me?” or “Just have faith in me.” Both of those expressions demonstrate the element of “trust” that is inherent in the Greek word.

salvation. The type of faith Paul writes of is one of trust and conviction.

B. Justification

When Paul writes of believers being “justified,” he is writing of our salvation. Justification is being made just or right before God. It was a Greek legal term used in courts to pronounce one “Not Guilty!” This is what Paul means when he writes that sinners are “justified freely by his grace.” Paul is speaking of sinners being declared “not guilty.”

C. Redemption

Paul writes that our justification (the “not guilty”) comes freely through the “redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” “Redemption” means a purchasing back of something. Much in the same sense of going to a pawn shop to hock a piece of jewelry and then going back to the shop to redeem or buy the jewelry back. Jesus’ death on the cross was, in a sense, God repurchasing sinners into righteousness. This is often portrayed as God “buying” us back from Satan. That portrayal is NOT of what Paul speaks. God did not bargain with Satan for our souls. God redeemed us (bought us back) from the death penalty that comes upon all who rebel against God. It is the curse and condition from which we are redeemed.

As we go back to the text armed with these definitions, we read Paul explaining the redeeming price God paid. God redeemed us presenting Christ as the “sacrifice of atonement” (3:25). This means Christ died, taking the wrath and anger due sinners and thereby turning it away from us.

Paul makes the point that Christ was dying for two sets of people, but the sets are not Jew and Gentile! Jesus died for those who lived and died before Christ as well as for those who died after Christ. In other words, even if God declared the world over after the death and resurrection of Christ, and even if there were to be no more people after Jesus’ death, then Christ still had to die. Christ had to die to give Abraham and others who pre-deceased Jesus heaven. The curse upon Adam and all his descendants required redemption. The only redemption that brings righteousness to any human is that from Calvary. God solves the sin problem for humanity pre- and post-

Jesus by paying for those sins in the sacrifice of Jesus, God incarnate (3:25-26).

With this profound truth set out, Paul then asks the Roman Church, “Where then is boasting?” (3:27) Paul points out that no one has a basis of boasting or self promoting themselves or their righteousness. The righteousness comes simply by faith, not by works of law – any law: Jewish or Gentile. There is only one God. He is God of Jew and Gentile alike. He justifies (“not guilty”) both Jew and Gentile through faith – plain and simple (3:27-30).

This does not serve to invalidate the Law (Torah) God gave to the Jews. In fact, it upholds the Law. Paul goes into chapter four explaining his case by appealing to the law itself. Paul looks at Genesis (the first book of the law) as proof for the very argument he is making.

1. The Example of Abraham

The first book of the law recounts the life of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, and his relationship with God. Paul turns to Abraham as his “proof text” for the argument of mankind’s salvation before God. Abraham is a suitable example because he was not justified by his works, but by his faith. Quoting Genesis 15:6, Paul writes that “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (4:3). Paul expounds on this salvation noting that if a man was working and receiving based on those works, we would call what the worker received “wages.” Such is not the case with the salvation of Abraham, nor is such the case for the Christian. Mankind’s salvation is not now, nor has it ever been, based upon works.

Paul turns also to David and the Psalms for support. Quoting Psalm 32:1-2, Paul notes that our blessing is that our sins are forgiven. The forgiveness is not because we worked our way out of the sins. It is because God covered the sins so that the sins will “never count against” us (4:7-8).

The salvation Paul preached, the salvation recounted in scripture, was not only for Jews. Gentiles have never approached God differently than Jews. Mere genetics or an act of circumcision does not change the cosmic justice

involved in redemption. In fact, Paul makes the point that the justification of Abraham by faith was BEFORE Abraham was circumcised, the distinctive Jewish rite. From this, Paul shows that Abraham is not merely the father of all Jews, but of all who believed, whether circumcised (Jews) or not (Gentiles). The promise to Abraham has its meaning because it is faith based and not works based. Works and law teach us our sin and in that sense, deliver us to wrath. But, Abraham removes the issue of law and genetics as we realize his justification by faith preceded his circumcision (and even the law by 400 years as Paul notes in Galatians) (4:9-15).

As the Jews and Gentiles read this, their differences become almost illusory. In the light of Christ's redeeming work and our salvation by faith, we stand in solidarity, Jew and Gentile alike. Paul drives his point home further quoting Genesis 17:5, where God declares that he has made Abraham "a father of many nations." Paul is blunt; all believers are children of Abraham. Jews have no particular claim as his "offspring" (4:16-17).

Paul then goes later in the Abraham saga in Genesis to discuss the promise of physical offspring and how it relates to the spiritual truth of offspring of faith. Abraham continued believing and being faithful before God when promised the physical and spiritual offspring, even though nature's truth (Abraham and Sarah's age!) would seem to invalidate the promise. Paul was fully confident that God would deliver! And, that faith became Abraham's righteousness. Trusting that God would do as promised, that God held the future, was Abraham's faith Paul uses to prove his point about our salvation (4:18-25).

It is important we see a truth here. Often, people speak of salvation and the pre-Calvary era as one distinct and different from that after the crucifixion. People speak and teach of salvation as being different for those dying after the resurrection as opposed to those before. Paul stands starkly opposed to such teaching. Paul uses for his text and proof of our post-Calvary salvation, that of Abraham, a clearly pre-Calvary figure. Following Calvary, we have the mystery of how God accomplishes our salvation revealed to us. But,

Abraham was saved, just as we are, by the death of Christ on his behalf, and Abraham's trusting God toward that end.

2. Summary of Our Righteousness (5:1-21).

Paul ends this discussion reaffirming that our justification by faith brings us peace with God. This gift that comes through faith in Jesus Christ produces more than peace today. It also gives us confidence in the promise of God's coming glory. With this peace and hope, we can face this world head on! When we suffer, we know we grow in character and confidence (5:1-5).

We remember that God waited until history's perfect moment, when Christ died for the ungodly. The concept still rocked Paul. He knew that occasionally someone might die for an exceptional person, but Christ died for sinners – unrighteous folks who would deny him at every turn (5:6-8).

The facts go even further for Paul (and us!). If Jesus died for us as sinners, if God reconciled us to him before we even asked, then how much must he love and support/save us now that we share in the resurrection of Jesus? This is a cause for great rejoicing! (5:9-11)

Paul illustrates his point from one more area of the Old Testament. Paul returns to Eden and Adam's original sin. Paul reminds the Romans that sin entered our world through the choice and sin of one man, Adam.² That was not only the source of our world's sin, but also our world's death. Death has made it to all men because all men sin. Adam's deeds were sin, even though God had not yet given the law (5:12-14).

Paul shows how Adam was a pattern of Jesus, not in the sense of being a sinner, but the opposite! Sin entered the world through Adam, one man. Righteousness has done the same. Righteousness has entered through one man, Jesus. Just as

² In a Jewish sense, we offspring of Adam were "in Adam's loins" when Adam sinned. Adam's sin is our sin; Adam's death and condition is our death and condition. We were in Adam and are equally sinners.

judgment and death/condemnation entered through the sin of one man, Adam, so had righteousness and life! One man's disobedience made all men sinners. So, one man's righteousness makes all believers righteous (5:15-19).

So, the law and the Jew/Gentile difference fades in light of Christ and our salvation. Jew/Gentile are truly alike. The Jewish law came not to save a select few of Adam's offspring. The law came to show all of us our sin and need for a Savior! (5:20-21)

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Saved by Jesus' death, plain and simple.
2. Faith in Jesus reconciles us to God.
3. Peace and hope are ours.