

Answering the Skeptics

Romans 3:1-8

Introduction

John Knox was one of the great lights of the Reformation era - - - particularly to the people of Scotland. We are told of an interesting exchange which took place early in his career- - - while he was assigned the task of a galley slave on a ship - - - a Roman Catholic priest came around and ordered the slaves to give due reverence to a statue of the Virgin Mary. [basically to kiss it]. When it was Knox's turn – he refused - - - and said he would not. The priest wouldn't take 'no' for an answer – and thrust the image up to his face. Knox took the image and hollered out: 'This is a piece of painted wood. She is better for swimming, I think, than for being worshiped.' And at that he flung the statue into the River. The officers with much trouble - - - were able to retrieve their beloved statue - - - but the slaves of the ship were no longer subject to the vain ceremony of kissing the image after that.

In many ways - - - the Roman Catholic religion reminds us of how people can take that which is good and true and turn it into complete and utter heresy by their own twisted practices

The Jews were guilty of such handling of holy truth as well

One of Jesus' classic confrontations with the Jews and religious leaders of his day - - - is referred to as the temple cleansing

The temple was seen as the very centerpiece of the worship practices of the nation

At one point - - - the temple housed the Ark of the Covenant / inside containing the Ten Commandments

In Jesus' day - - - there was a fully functioning priesthood - - with daily sacrifices / worship festivals

Yet - - - Jesus – in observing much of what took place there - - - saw only corruption and vice – confronted them in various ways - - - one of the more dramatic was the temple cleansing

Mark 11:15-18 - 'And they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to cast out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves; and He would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple. And He began to teach and say to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a robber's den.'" And the chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for all the multitude was astonished at His teaching.'

Jesus goes into the temple and starts flinging over the tables of money changers / coins flying everywhere - - - get this racket out of here!

On another occasion - - - he rebuked them in their unholy handling of Scripture

John 5:39-40 - 'You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life.'

Jesus says to the Jews - - - they have the Bible - - - they have the sacrificial system / they have the temple - - - but their hearts are far from God

Quoting an OT passage from Isaiah - - - He referred to their misguided worship

Matthew 15:8, 9 - 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'

Their worship is vain

Another striking instance - - - came in the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation

The letter to the church at Smyrna – [Jesus speaking]

Revelation 2:9 - 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.'

Caiaphas the High Priest / the Pharisees / the Sadducees – all who opposed Jesus - - - their worship of God was a twisted religion - - - a synagogue of Satan

In our study of Romans - - - Paul has been teaching that both Jew and Gentile are under the wrath of God - - - in need of the gospel for salvation

Paul is teaching that no one makes it into heaven apart from Christ -- - that knowledge of the Law will not save / that circumcision will be of no avail / physical descent from Abraham - - - will not avail

As we progress thru Paul's argumentation in the book of Romans - - - we come to a portion where he addresses some of the questions that might come from the Jewish skeptic

These may have been questions or objections posed to Paul in dialogue with Jews - - - or perhaps may even reflect questions Paul had before coming to Christ

We are reminded that to have faith in Christ is not to close our minds - - - and become unthinking zombies -- - but rather to seek out the truth thru prayer / seeking / openness to God's truth

Nancy Pearcey is a Christian apologist who worked with Chuck Colson on several of his books

Nancy R. Pearcey: "Many people operate as though the definition of faith were, 'Don't ask questions, just believe.' They quote Jesus Himself, who taught His followers to have the faith of a child (Mark 10:15). But I once heard Francis Schaeffer respond by saying, 'Don't you realize how many questions children ask?'"

Ask questions / ask them reverently / seek and ye shall find

In this section Paul raises the question: What good was there in being a Jew?

If being a Jew doesn't get you into heaven? - - - what good was it?

I. Holy Bible - vv. 1-2

Were the advantages of the Jews / of being God's chosen people – all in vain? - - - to no good effect?

Were any Jews saved? [these are all logical questions if we understand what Paul is saying?]

Why did God bother giving the Ten Commandments / the whole sacrificial system?

Paul doesn't sweep the questions under the rug – because the answer to these questions gives greater understanding of the gospel

He will ultimately answer all of those questions in the book of Romans

The first objection of the skeptic – 'Are you telling me that being a Jew means nothing?'

Why did God make a covenant with Abraham? Why circumcision?

Why did He bother delivering the Israelites out of Egypt?

Why did He bother giving them the law and the tabernacle worship / etc. / promising them the land of Canaan?

God chose Israel out of all the nations - - - in a way in which he did not choose Egypt or Assyria / etc. - - - and God made a covenant with Israel

What is the benefit of being God's chosen people?

These are good questions

We might expect Paul to say – in light of what he has just said – "there is no advantage to being a Jew"

Instead – his response is: there is great advantage [this is an issue Paul will return to in Ch. 9, 11]

Here he refers to one major advantage

Advantage # 1 – the Word of God – v. 2

The OT did not come to some Egyptians over here – some Persians over there – some Babylonians / some Chinese / etc. No – it came to Jews – Moses / Samuel / David / Isaiah / etc.

They were given the written revelation of the mind and purposes of God

That was an awesome privilege

As Carl Sagan once put the secular point of view of life in this world – humanity is like an orphan abandoned on earth's doorstep with no note attached explaining who we are or where we came from

In reality – there is a note! - - - it's called the Bible – God gave it to the Jews

Genesis 1:1 - 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.'

Humanity is the creation of God – made in the image of God - - - male and female

We are not orphans left without answers - - - the answers are found in a book – which comes to us by God's Holy Spirit - - - thru Jewish prophets and men of God

Ronald Reagan: "Within the covers of the Bible are the answers for all the problems men face."

The only question is: Will we turn it?

Will we give God's Word a try after we have exhausted all other avenues and vain paths - - and come to the end of ourselves and say: 'God – show me your way!'

It was a great privilege to the Jew to receive God's Word – same for the church the church

In God's Word – we find the moral law / we encounter God's wisdom / guidance / purpose and will / teaching / instruction / etc.

It's a great privilege we have today - - - to have the Bible

A woman once wrote to John MacArthur a seething letter, 'You resort to Greek translations and fancy words to explain away what the Holy Spirit is doing in the church today. Let me give you a piece of advice that might just save you from the wrath of almighty God. Put away your Bible and your books and stop studying. Ask the Holy Ghost to come upon you and give you the gift of tongues.' [Charismatic Chaos, p. 23]

She did not like someone pointing out that their so called gift of tongues was nothing of the sort - - - and their prophecies are fake and false / their healings fraudulent attempts to gain money

Our message: 'Do not put away your bible - - - it is a great privilege' - - - read it / understand it / hold to it

Havin the Bible is a great privilege - - - Does having the Bible save?

Yes and No - - - not apart from faith

Paul once pointed to the great privilege of Timothy here

II Tim. 3:15 - 'and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.'

I Peter 1:23 - 'For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is through the living and abiding word of God.'

The bible is an instrument thru which God communicates His saving grace / sanctifying grace / His wisdom and will for our lives

Nobody is saved ultimately apart from the Word of God

Romans 10:17 - 'So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.'

But – mere possession of a Bible does not save

Why not? [it must be received by faith]

Hebrews 4:1-3 - '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. 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. For we who have believed enter that rest'

The word they heard did not profit them - - - why? Because of unbelief – they were not able to enter the Promised Land

It is faith that that makes the difference

In v. 3 – Paul will ask the question:

Romans 3:3 - 'What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?'

Here Paul makes a distinction between Jews who believed and Jews who did not believe

Were any Jews saved in their history? Absolutely

In fact, Paul will point to the fact that justification by faith has always been the way in which God has saved people

Romans 4:3 - 'For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God and it was reckoned unto Him as righteousness."'

All the heroes of the faith listed in Hebrews 11 – they received God's message with faith

By faith – Noah built the ark

By faith – Abel offered a better sacrifice

By faith Enoch walked with God

Paul gives a more comprehensive answer to this question of Jewish salvation in Romans 11 – where he addresses the future of Israel

Jesus said the kingdom of God was being taken from them and given to a nation producing the fruit of it

We know that is the church

With Jesus – God set aside the whole Jewish system of worship – temple veil torn in two / sacrificial system set aside - - because it has been fulfilled in Christ - the Lamb of God

A faithful Jew from the 1st century thru today – is one who comes to God thru Jesus

A key concept which Paul will bring in is the idea of a remnant - - - a smaller group of faithful within a larger group – of which many are unfaithful

Romans 11:1-4 - 'I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed Thy prophets, They have torn down Thine altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."

Elijah says - - - God – they are so wicked - - - they are killing prophets / tearing down altars to you / etc. - - - theirs is a twisted religion - - - but God point out - - - a spiritual remnant

Romans 11:5-7 - 'In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened.'

Paul refers to a dark period in Israel's history -- most were out of favor with God -- - abandoned to idolatry / baal worship - - - a veritable synagogue of Satan

But Paul says – remember - - - there was still a faithful remnant unto the Lord - - - there were still 7000 that had not bowed the knee to Baal

Martin Luther: 'To the Jews, God fulfilled His promises in such a way that not all, but indeed some, namely the elect, received the promise, for God cannot lie. So God is justified in His sayings of promises.'

Disobedience and unbelief nullify advantages - - to the individual - - - but they still remain privileges - - - just squandered privileges

A person can own a Bible - - - but if they don't open it and read it / believe it - - they are no better off than the guy who has no Bible

Mark Twain: 'The man who doesn't read has no advantage over the man who can't read.'

The spiritual principle is the man who does not read His Bible with faith -- - has no advantage over the man who has no Bible

Hebrews 11:6 - 'But without faith it is impossible to please Him; for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.' [kjv]

II. Has God Been Unfaithful? - vv. 3-4

Does the unbelief of man nullify the faithfulness of God?

If being a Jew is not enough to save - - then - - - what should I think of God who chose the Jews and made all these covenants with them? – told them they would be blessed if they obey and trust Him

Is God just / righteous in condemning Israel?

Paul says, 'May it never be'

God's punishment of sin exhibits His own righteous character – that is key to the following 4 verses as well

Paul quotes Psalm 51 – where David acknowledges God's utter righteousness in bringing temporal judgment upon him

David had sinned – committed adultery with Bathsheba / she became pregnant - - - when David could not find any way to cover his sin - - - he had Uriah killed -- - and then took Bathsheba to be his wife

In the aftermath - - God unleashed a sequence of temporal judgments in David's life - - - to show him the wickedness of his sin

Did David think God was not being fair with him or unjust?

Psalm 51:4 - 'Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight, so that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, and blameless when Thou dost judge.'

Paul is quoting from the Septuagint - - - which was a Greek translation of the OT - - - but the meaning is clear

David took sides with God against Himself – that is the position of anyone who is ever saved

David says - - - "I deserve God's judgment" - - - but He also did something very important - - - he called upon God and asked for mercy

Psalm 51:1-3 - 'Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.'

David knew he was not saved by being a Jew or being circumcised / or by ark of the covenant / etc.

He saw that he needed the forgiveness of God - - - mercy

This is what Jesus portrayed in the parable of the publican and the Pharisee [Luke 18]

The Pharisee lists all his virtues - - - 'I'm great aren't I?'

The publican prays a simple prayer: 'God be merciful to me the sinner'

Jesus says - - - that is the man who is justified

*** The law of God should have made every Jew say – ‘God I am under your condemnation on the basis of the law – you are blameless when you judge me – ‘God be merciful to me the sinner’ – forgive me / cleanse me

Instead – it made many say, ‘Look at me – I have kept the law’ - - - I’m good! / we are so much better than the rabble or the Gentile

III. God the Righteous - vv. 5-8

The next argument of the skeptic: ‘it sounds to me like you are saying that my sin does not thwart the purposes of God but rather magnifies His righteousness in my judgment’

Maybe – I should just go ahead and sin away - - - to God be the glory!

Paul says: ‘Your condemnation is just!

Conclusion

We have the privilege of the Word of God / the fullness of the revelation

It does no good apart from faith

No matter how people respond to God’s Word / promises - - - He is always faithful to what He says – either in judgment or in mercy

Daniel Defoe – the author of the great classic, ‘Robinson Crusoe’ – has his main character shipwrecked on a desert island – all alone. Crusoe is struck with a fever which lasts for several days. No one is there to help him or bring him water – he begins to think that he will die on that island. He had lived the hard life of a sailor – and committed all the vices that went with that lifestyle. He had never given much thought to God.

In his desperation he decides to open a Bible which he found in his chest and he comes across the passage: ‘Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.’ That night he did something he had never done before – he prayed – called upon the Lord – and from then on he placed his hope in God and His mercy

The word of God comes to us today

John 6:40 - 'For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.'