

Introduction to Romans

Chapter 2

The first thing to say about this chapter is the opening word, 'Therefore'. We have to remember that these epistles were letters written to various people or churches and there were no chapter breaks in the original. So, whenever we see a chapter or passage of Scripture starting like this we need to ask ourselves, what is the 'therefore' there for? It usually notes a conclusion, or summary of what was stated before and here we see Paul doing exactly that, he is concluding his statement that ended chapter one.

In Vs. 1-11, Paul continues this topic of divine judgement and focuses on the fact that God will judge everyone on the day of judgement both saints and sinners and, "*He will render to each one according to his works.*" (Vs.6.) This tells us that there will be differing degrees of punishment by God and His punishment will fit the sin. I think it is important to note at this point why Paul emphasises "*the Jew first and also the Greek,*" and to give a little bit of background as to what the afterlife looked like for the Jews and the Greeks of Paul's day.

The Greek concept:

According to the ancient Greeks, at the time of death, the soul separates from the body and is transported to the underworld, where it is accepted by the god Hades, who is known to reside at the edges of the ocean and under the deepest parts of the Earth. Hades' realm, as opposed to the kingdom of Mount Olympus, which was the home of the gods who dwelt in fabulous palaces of marble and gold, and it is clearly described in Homer's Iliad. It was a fortified hill-top and palace complex located just below the peaks of Mount Olympos. The golden gates of the heavenly fortress were guarded by the three Horai who were the goddesses of the seasons and of time, and it contained the palace of Zeus as well as lesser palaces for the other gods. Outside the palace of Zeus was a large courtyard where the full assembly of the gods would gather, including all of the earth, river and sea deities as well as nymphs. It existed in a zone known as the aether, the bright upper air or shining blue of the sky. In contrast, Hades is virtually all gloom and darkness, solely inhabited by the dead. Greek mythology stresses respect for the dead due to the belief in their continued existence after their spirit has passed on.

The Greeks believed that after the burial, Hermes (the god of trade, travellers, and merchants) led the soul to the entrance of the underworld to a ferry that carried the spirit across the Acheron (river of woe) and the Styx (river of hate). These two rivers divided the world of the living from that of the dead. Charon, sometimes called the Ferryman, rowed the boat. Only souls who paid him the boat fare with coins, placed on the eyes or under the tongue of the corpse during burial, could gain access to the ferry. Those unable to pay the fare remained trapped between the world of the living and the dead. The Greek underworld consisted of various realms ruled by Hades. Elysium resembles a Greek pagan version of our Christian Heaven where good spirits whose lives were etched into the memories of the living began a new state of existence. Wicked spirits were condemned to the dark pits of Tartarus. These spirits either overindulged their carnal desires or lived more for earthly pleasures than spiritual fulfilment during their earthly life. Forgotten spirits who did not significantly impact the lives of others were sent to the Land of Hades where they wandered for all eternity.

The Jewish concept:

For the Jew there is no concept of salvation! They believe, as God's covenant people, they will inherit a place in heaven purely by virtue of being children of Abraham. In fact, a debate told to us in John 8, shows us that this is exactly the basis for their argument with Jesus when they tell Him in Vs.33 that, "*We are offspring of Abraham...*" Jews do not assume that God judges people individually, and the reason they don't believe in individual salvation is because, as they see it, they are part of the nation of Israel and Israel will automatically have a place in the afterlife but, in the final judgement God will hold everyone to account for their lives and their sins. "*The Jew first*", because they were given the Law and the prophets first, then they were given the Messiah and the gospel first.

God has given them every opportunity, just as He gives all men every opportunity, to surrender to the gospel and accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. God's judgement is righteous and it is His nature to be just and because of this, He, "*shows no partiality.*" Not one single person on the judgement day can say, "that's not fair", both the Jew and the Gentile, the saint and the sinner, all will be judged accordingly.

Verses 12-29

In this segment Paul looks at God's judgement in light of the Law. Judaism is about being good in order to have a healthy relationship with God, man, and yourself. Judaism teaches that God gave the law and that there are two sorts of law, there is the covenant at Sinai, which God made with the Jews in order to define the role of Jews in His plan. All Jews should follow the teachings of God as given in that covenant. For the traditional Jew, this means following the laws given in the written and oral Torah, (the Torah being the law of God as revealed to Moses, and recorded in the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures). The second law is the covenant God made with Noah and his descendants and the Jews believe that this is a simpler law that non-Jews are expected to follow as well. Orthodox Jews believe that the souls of the righteous dead go to a place similar to our Christian concept of heaven, or that they are reincarnated through many lifetimes, or that they simply wait for the messiah, when they will be resurrected.

They believe that by focussing on issues of reward and punishment, you take away from the good you do or taint your good works with selfish motives. Jews believe that God expects you to do the best you can with what you have and in whatever situation you find yourself, you have the power to perfect yourself. So, to whatever extent, you do what you can and enjoy its effects in the World to Come. The role of Jewish law is to provide the tools that teach you how to do that, and it teaches you the values you should learn. Traditional Judaism believes that death is not the end of human existence. Judaism is primarily focused on life here and now rather than on the afterlife, and Judaism doesn't have a definite view on the afterlife, which leaves a lot of room for personal opinion and interpretation. It was a belief system that distinguished the Pharisees from the Sadducees, who rejected the concept of resurrection because it is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah. Resurrection of the dead for Jews will occur in the messianic age, which is a time referred to in Hebrew as the Olam Ha-Ba, the World to Come, when the messiah comes to initiate the perfect world of peace and prosperity, the righteous dead will be brought back to life but the wicked dead will not be resurrected. For the Jews, the idea that they are earning a place in heaven is unacceptable because it simply doesn't enter into the equation, they see themselves as God's people which entitles them to enter a better afterlife. However, their place in the Olam Ha-Ba is determined by a merit system based on their actions, and the view of Judaism is that the righteous of all nations can share in the Olam Ha-Ba.

This is the belief system that Jesus sought to correct in His earthly ministry, and it stood in stark contrast to the teachings of God in His gospel. Paul too stood against a system that Paul, being a pharisee and a scholar, understood and he was able to argue against. After his conversion by Jesus Paul understood better than anyone else of his time the importance of the truths of Jesus' teachings and how, these teachings are not to be distorted in any way. It's little wonder then that as we look at the teachings of Jesus it is interesting to see that He taught more about hell than He did about heaven. It's clear to see now why Paul says he is, "*not ashamed of the gospel.*" So, in light of this backdrop, as we carry on into chapter two we can appreciate why Paul is so passionate to teach on God's righteous judgement.