

Romans

Chapter 2

Paul is continuing the theme of his letter where we left it at the end of chapter one. In that chapter we saw how God's judgement no longer acts to restrain men in their sin as He gives them over to their desires and this causes men to influence others to sin, despite God's revelation of Himself to man through nature which serves to communicate God's character and moral standards.

Verses 1-5

As he continues this topic of divine judgement Paul is focusing his attention to a specific group of people and, although we can't be sure, the text does imply that the Jews are in view here, although they are not named until Vs. 17. At this point, I think it would help us to understand this letter better if we look at the Jewish concept of salvation and their relationship with God. The afterlife, or heaven, is alien to the Jews and we need to consider this when we study the New Testament scriptures, so let's look at it now.

Basically, 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. 31 that, "*We are offspring of Abraham...*"

Salvation focuses on the afterlife, which is not significant in Judaism. Jews believe that people are supposed to do the best they can at being good. They do this because it is the right thing to do and any personal gain is a side effect. They believe that by focussing on issues of reward and punishment you take away from the good you do and taint your good works with selfish motives. 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. 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. Judaism is about being good in order to have a healthy relationship with God, man, and yourself. The role of Jewish law is to provide tools that teach you how to do that, and it teaches you the values you should learn. Judaism teaches that God gave these laws 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 is 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.

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. 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 the messiah, when they will be resurrected. Also, some Orthodox Jews believe that the souls of the wicked are tormented by demons of their own creation, or that wicked souls are simply destroyed at death and cease to exist. The Torah emphasises immediate physical rewards and punishments rather than future ones and there is evidence in the Torah of a belief in existence after death. The Torah indicates in several places that the righteous will be reunited with their loved ones after death, while the wicked will be excluded from this reunion. Their belief in the eventual resurrection of the dead is a fundamental belief of traditional Judaism, and it was a belief that distinguished the Pharisees from the Sadducees. The Sadducees rejected the concept of resurrection because it is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah. Whereas the Pharisees believe the concept is implied in certain verses.

This resurrection of the dead 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 and given the opportunity to experience the perfected world that their righteousness helped to create, but the wicked dead will not be resurrected.

For the Jews, the idea that they are earning a place in heaven is unacceptable because the question of where they go after death 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.

There is also a place of spiritual reward for the righteous referred to in Hebrew as Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden). This is not the same place we see in Genesis where Adam and Eve were; this is a place of spiritual perfection. Only the very righteous go directly to Gan Eden. The average person descends to a place of punishment and/or purification, generally referred to as Gehinnom or in Yiddish, Gehenna, also known as She'ol, or by other names. According to one view, every sin a person commits creates an angel of destruction (a demon), and after they die they are punished by the very demons that they created. Some view Gehinnom as a place of severe punishment, while other sources see it as a time when they can see the actions of their lives and see the harm they have done and the opportunities they missed, and they will experience remorse for our actions.

The period of time in Gehinnom can be anything up to 12 months, after which they ascend to take their place in Olam Ha-Ba. However, the wicked are punished for the entire 12 months. Some say that at the end of those 12 months the wicked soul is utterly destroyed and ceases to exist, while others say that the soul continues to exist in a state of conscious remorse.

This is the belief system that Jesus sought to correct in His earthly ministry, and it was one that Paul too was up against, and it was a system that Paul, being a pharisee and a scholar, understood and he was able to argue against.

Now back to our text. Paul is arguing that God's judgement is personal and is not based on a person's knowledge of the law. In Vs. 4 Paul is explaining to this group of people that they are presuming on God's grace, and His withholding His judgement from them is actually being mistaken by them as God condoning their actions.

Verses 6-11

Here Paul is laying down the basis for judgement. He is not denying that salvation is by grace, what he is saying is that God's judgement will be according to every aspect of a person's relationship with Him. God will judge everyone on their works. So, how can we be judged by our works if we are saved by grace? Those people who receive the grace of God are imputed with the perfect works of Jesus which He accomplished in His ministry on earth. Jesus came not only to die the perfect sacrifice, but to live a perfect life of obedience to the will of God and fulfill all that the law of God required. Jesus tells us that in Matt. 5:17-18, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."* He demonstrated this when He went to John the Baptist to be baptised. Jesus had no need of repentance because He was already sinless and perfect, but in obedience to the law of God Jesus submitted to the requirements of the law of God, which was baptism. John protested to Jesus that He had no need of baptism but Jesus told John in Mark 3:15 that, *"...it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."* Jesus' baptism pointed towards the cross where Isaiah foretold that God's servant would bear the sins of many (Isaiah 53:11-12). Jesus calls His death on the cross a baptism in Luke 12:50, and Jesus accepted that the cross was an integral part of God's plan of salvation. So Jesus has fulfilled the law on our behalf and so now, when a person is reborn of God, God not only grants us the faith to believe but He imputes the works of Jesus, the fulfilment of the law, onto us, accounting Jesus' works and righteousness to us, and therefore we are saved by His righteousness.

This is why Paul says here that people who receive the gift of grace will seek '*glory and honour and immortality*,' because they will live according to the will of God and bear fruit through the Holy Spirit. Whereas the other group of people Paul is speaking about, those who are "*self seeking*" will only do what is in their own best interest and for their own gain, and in doing so they deny the grace of God in their lives therefore, God will judge each man accordingly, both Jew and Gentile. God clearly states in scripture that he is impartial, in Deut. 10:17, He says, "*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.*" God is both just and justifier, and His judgement is perfect and His grace is freely given and we dare not presume on His grace.

Verses 12-16

The Jews, as we have already seen, take great comfort in the law of Moses, believing that God would show them favour by virtue of them being a Jew and living under the law. This is such a strong basis for their faith that Paul addresses this issue many times throughout this letter. Paul points out that it is not our knowledge of the law which pleases God, but our obedience to God's will in the law. That is the difference between Jew and Gentile and that is the basis for God's judgement on individuals, both Jew and Gentile. The law of Moses, summed up in the Ten Commandments, gives us God's condemnation of sin, but the root cause of sin lies in our hearts and not in the law. "*The work of the law,*" refers to the moral commandments of God which are "*written on their hearts,*" which is our conscience.

Everyone instinctively know right from wrong, all parents know you don't need to teach a child how to choose right from wrong, they know from a very early age. We have this ability because we were created in God's image and received an inbuilt instinct for right and wrong. Therefore this is how God bases His judgement on us, not by what we know of His law but by how we chose to live by His law (Vs. 13). It was this kind of response to God's law that Paul had to reprimand the Corinthian church for because they trespassed boundaries that even the pagans observed (1 Cor. 5:1). All judgement is now given to Jesus who will judge perfectly. He will judge us on His standards and no one can plead ignorance or unfairness because Jesus lived as a man and knows the truth of man's heart.

Verses 17-29

Now Paul puts a name to this group of people, the Jews, who claim their special knowledge and privilege, and he deals with them in more detail regarding the law and circumcision. Paul gives a list of these privileges that the Jews boasted about and agrees that God's Word was given to them by special grace, but they grew to mistake this grace for superiority thinking it set them above others. The privilege of receiving God's grace carries with it the responsibility to live up to that grace, and that is something that the Jews had failed to do, specifically, Paul points out, the commandments of adultery, sacrilege and theft (Vs. 21-22) (see also Ex. 20: 4,5,14,15).

Paul's argument against the Jewish view of God's favouritism toward them reaches its peak in Paul's condemnation of circumcision. Because of their behaviour and their state of heart, the Jews had made circumcision an empty ritual. Physical circumcision was a privilege that the Jews enjoyed because it set them apart as God's chosen people and it was a physical sign of their sanctification. The climax of Paul's argument is that in order to be a true Jew, one who is chosen and set apart by God, it is the heart that must be circumcised leading to a life that shows the outward signs of sanctification (see Deut. 30:6; 10:16; 10:12-22;). It is the work of God the Holy Spirit that results in a God centred life and it is this that makes someone a member of God's covenant people in the proper sense of the word. Having the law and being circumcised doesn't mean you are chosen by God, only His grace in bringing you salvation through faith in Jesus will accomplish His will for your life. Paul's conclusion would have shocked the Jewish hearers in his day but Paul's arguments are rooted in the Old testament (see Lev. 26:41; Jer. 9:25; Ezek. 41:7), and it is only the removing of their stubbornness that will bring Israel back to God.