

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Lesson 8, Chapters 2 and 3

If you think that after going through the mind twistingly difficult words of Paul in Romans 2 last week, that it is going to get easier this week, think again. Part of what makes this so challenging for us is that Paul's terms, and the way they are translated into English, are so strange sounding to us. But even more, if we are truly going to understand Paul's words then we have to do that from the perspective of his 2000-years-ago Jewish cultural understanding of what he meant by what he said.

We left off at verse 17 as Paul continues his diatribe against the Believers of Rome; people he had never met. While in chapter one he took aim mostly at gentiles, here in chapter 2 he is taking aim mostly at Jews. But always these gentiles and Jews are assumed to be Believers in Yeshua. However Paul seems to be greatly concerned about what it is that they actually believe and practice, what doctrines their leaders and elders have taught them, and he clearly has a suspicion that while they claim trust in Yeshua they also continue, on some level, to participate in the anything-goes Roman Hellenistic society that is permeated with sexual deviance and perversion.

I want to make a point that I haven't since the Introduction to the Book of Romans. While in the field of literature the style that Paul is writing in is legitimately called "diatribe", yet from a Hebrew viewpoint he is merely making his case as any good studied Rabbi would. We find his style of making an argument used throughout the Jewish Talmud. The Talmud is a compilation of Jewish religious rulings that we would correctly call **Halakhah**, Jewish Law. It is true that the first part of the two works that together make up the Talmud (the **Mishnah** and then the **Gemara**) wouldn't exist for a couple of hundred years after Paul's day. But that doesn't change the fact that the Talmud merely records and uses the traditional way that Rabbis had long been debating and forming their religious interpretations and the resulting religious regulations that control Judaism. Regulations that we call Jewish Law or **Halakhah**. This reality will come more visibly into play as we get into Romans chapter 3, but it also plays a role in Romans chapter 2.

Since Christian Bible commentators have historically been uninterested in factoring in the realities of the Jewish society of 2nd Temple Judaism (Christ's and Paul's era) in their commentaries, because their view is that the New Testament belongs to gentile Christ followers and Jewishness plays no real role; and because of the additional understanding that the deciphering of the Dead Sea Scrolls has recently brought us, only in the last decade is it finally being acknowledged that much of what Paul says in his letters he says in the Jewish idiom of his day and thus it has a definite effect upon the meaning. However change is a slow process, and how these new findings will effect ancient and cherished Church doctrines (most of which have been derived from the Book of Romans) is unclear. What is clear is that there will be an effect, much of it not welcome by the more established and well known Christian denominations that have little interest in challenging some of their own faith principles that

have made them who they are. So don't expect to take what you will learn to other Believers and have them instantly embrace it. Change takes time.

Let's read the final few verses of Romans chapter 2.

READ ROMANS CHAPTER 2:17 – end

The word circumcision is repeated numerous times in these verses, as is the word "uncircumcision", which isn't really a proper English word. And the reason that uncircumcision isn't a real word is that it is an oxymoron; it is not something that can rationally exist at least on the physical level. That is, a male cannot be circumcised and then have it reversed (uncircumcised). Although I am told that there actually have been surgical attempts to hide a former circumcision in modern times, even so, especially in Paul's day, uncircumcision was a physical impossibility and no one would ever think in terms of having his foreskin somehow reattached!

Therefore a person who Paul identifies as being uncircumcised merely means a male who has not yet had a circumcision. Since Jewish males are given no choice in the matter (they are circumcised as infants on the 8th day after their birth), then "the uncircumcised" can only mean gentiles. So there is a distinct difference between what Paul is meaning when he says "uncircumcised" as opposed to "uncircumcision". Uncircumcised means a gentile; uncircumcision means a Jew who had a circumcision but now it has been reversed. But since that is physically impossible, then obviously Paul means uncircumcision in different sense. But what sense?

The reason that Paul uses the word circumcision is precisely because in this portion of his letter he is talking primarily to Jews. And for a Jewish male there existed then, and exists now, no more emphatic indication of his Jewishness than having been circumcised. Circumcision was, in many ways, a point of great pride because it was felt that God so exalted His Jewish people that to be Jewish was part and parcel of being accepted by God as righteous. So gentiles (the uncircumcised) were generally seen as evil and not righteous and could expect only God's curses and His wrath; but Jews (the circumcised) generally thought of themselves as good and righteous and could expect only God's blessings and His mercy. Trying to puncture this wrong attitude of his fellow Jews is largely what the Book of Romans has thus far been about, as step-by-step Paul builds a case for accepting the Gospel of Christ that he teaches; a Gospel that applies equally to Jews and gentiles. And it begins by the Jews he is currently addressing understanding that this sense of security that they have been relying on....that is, that merely being Jewish....merely being circumcised....was sufficient to be seen as righteousness by Yehoveh, is really a false security because it isn't true.

So if you are a Jew reading what Paul says in the first part of these final verses of chapter 2, then it appears that Paul is saying that circumcision does not and never had any real value. I suspect that many Jews were offended and never read any farther. And I assure you from having taught Romans many years ago in a very different setting, most Christians take this as meaning that Jews no longer having any special status before God, and so satisfied, they don't read any farther either. So Paul begins by making it crystal clear who it is that he is

challenging: he says “if you call yourself a Jew”.

Now would be a good time to demonstrate something that might not have occurred to you. The terms Hebrew and Israelite were no longer in fashion in the New Testament era. Rather the term was *Y’hudi*; we translate that into English as Jew. But there is another very important dynamic that is not to be missed; tribalism has given way to nationalism. That is, the Old Testament dealt with Israel at a time when they were organized as 12 distinct tribes, and the tribes each continually vied to be the most dominant of their brother tribes. This was not a plot or an aberration within Israel; it was (and remains) the very essence of the tribal way of life and social structure, and we see it still being played out today in the Middle East and in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other backwards places where Islam dominates.

But when the 10 Israelite tribes of the north (typically called Ephraim in the Bible) were exiled by the Assyrians from their tribal territories in the early 700’s B.C., then the rivalries among the tribes of Israel all but ceased. All that remained of Israel were two tribes: the tribe of Judah, a huge dominant tribe, and the much smaller and weaker tribe of Benjamin. Without doubt there were also miniscule remnants of the other 10 tribes who declared loyalty to Judah, or through family ties due to marriage, were allowed to remain within the tribal territories of Judah and Benjamin. But especially upon the return from the Babylonian exile around 500 B.C, the Hebrews who came back to the land saw themselves as more unified, belonging to one nation, Judah, and not divided up as members of particular tribes. Certainly they remembered, and no doubt were usually proud of, their ancient family heritage that would have tied them to one or another of the 12 tribes. But just as Americans can look back a few generations and be aware of our heritage as having come from German, or English, or French, or Asian stock, we don’t identify ourselves or feel any special loyalty to Germany, England, France, or perhaps China. We think only in national terms: we are Americans. So by Paul’s day, Jew was a national term (like American) that indicated an attachment to the nation of Judah. The Diaspora Jews personally felt, and were seen by gentiles, as maintaining a hereditary tie to the nation of Judah, and therefore they maintained a certain measure of loyalty to Judah, often above loyalty to the country and culture they now lived among. And this was always a source of problems for the Jews and it regularly led to persecutions. That is, the Jews tended not to fully assimilate into whatever nation they wandered but rather they set up their own separate Jewish communities. And at the bottom of this mindset to disperse but also to be separate was the matter of circumcision, which was the foundation of their desired identity as Jews. So circumcision played a big role in Judaism.

Thus when Paul goes through this rather frank, harsh, and a bit tedious and repetitive diatribe in verses 17 – 29, it is because of the cultural reality for the Jews at that time that I have just described. In many ways this is all about what Paul sees as a bad attitude and he was intent on adjusting it. Paul saw the issue of circumcision (in the sense that Jews typically thought of it) not only as an unnecessary wall of division between Believing Jews and Believing gentiles that God had never authorized, but also as a possible barrier to Jews accepting the true message of the Gospel and their own Jewish Messiah. Because after all: if in their Jewish pride they truly believed that their Jewishness (expressed most fundamentally by their circumcision) automatically brought them righteousness before God, then why would they need to be “saved” by the Gospel of Christ?

Paul explains that as Jews they have convinced themselves that since they HEAR the Law spoken then they must know what is right and wrong. So how is it then that since they see themselves as especially qualified guides to the blind and instructors for the spiritually unaware (the spiritually unaware meaning gentiles), that the very things gleaned from the Law that they instruct others to obey, they themselves violate? They claim to have all the advantages of being God's chosen people, of being the privileged receivers and keepers of God's Word to humankind, but in the end they don't do what God's Word demands. Let's remember who the teachers of the Law were in Paul's day: the Pharisees. And what did the Pharisees live by and teach? **Halakhah**; Tradition. Even though Jews said among themselves that they obeyed the Law, for them the Law wasn't actually the original Law of Moses and it hadn't been for several centuries; they lived according to religious rulings (**Halakhah**) that various groups of Pharisees taught in the synagogues, and we hear Yeshua rail against this in the Gospel of Luke.

Mark 7:1-14 CJB

^{CJB} **Mark 7:1** *The P'rushim and some of the Torah-teachers who had come from Yerushalayim gathered together with Yeshua*

² *and saw that some of his talmidim ate with ritually unclean hands, that is, without doing n'tilat-yadayim.*

³ *(For the P'rushim, and indeed all the Judeans, holding fast to the Tradition of the Elders, do not eat unless they have given their hands a ceremonial washing.*

⁴ *Also, when they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they have rinsed their hands up to the wrist; and they adhere to many other traditions, such as washing cups, pots and bronze vessels.)*

⁵ *The P'rushim and the Torah-teachers asked him, "Why don't your talmidim live in accordance with the Tradition of the Elders, but instead eat with ritually unclean hands?"*

⁶ *Yeshua answered them, "Yesha'yahu was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites- as it is written, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me.*

⁷ *Their worship of me is useless, because they teach man-made rules as if they were doctrines.'*

⁸ *"You depart from God's command and hold onto human tradition.*

⁹ *Indeed," he said to them, "you have made a fine art of departing from God's command in order to keep your tradition!*

¹⁰ *For Moshe said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'*

¹¹ ***But you say, 'If someone says to his father or mother, "I have promised as a korban" ' (that is, as a gift to God) " ' "what I might have used to help you,"***

¹² ***then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.***

¹³ ***Thus, with your tradition which you had handed down to you, you nullify the Word of God! And you do other things like this."***

So the result of this hypocritical behavior of these Believing Jews Paul is berating in chapter 2 is that God's name is being blasphemed by gentiles. In other words, these Jews who think their Jewishness (especially marked by their circumcision) gives them special privilege before God, and even those who claim to have some sort of belief in Yeshua don't live the good and righteous lives that are the standard presented in the true Law (the Torah, the Law of Moses), and the result is that the gentile nations think that what Jewish Believers believe is all rather worthless since it certainly doesn't seem to be reflected in their lives. These Jews Paul is addressing are hurting the cause of the Gospel.

Wow. What an indictment and how deeply we all had better think about this as it pertains to ourselves and to whatever congregation or fellowship we belong. Are we so rules conscious, so firmly entrenched in our manmade traditions, and so certain that we hold all the truth, and yet we don't display and live out the most fundamental elements of our faith so we're mostly a turn off to people who desperately need Christ but in us they see no reason to seek Him?

Mathew 22:36-40 CJB

³⁶ ***"Rabbi, which of the mitzvot in the Torah is the most important?"***

³⁷ ***He (Yeshua) told him, "'You are to love ADONAI your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.'***

³⁸ ***This is the greatest and most important mitzvah.***

³⁹ ***And a second is similar to it, 'You are to love your neighbor as yourself.'***

⁴⁰ ***All of the Torah and the Prophets are dependent on these two mitzvot."***

Most Christians are familiar with verses 37 – 39. But verse 36 and verse 40 are generally overlooked. Verse 36 says that the commandments to love God and love our neighbor are taken from where? From the Torah, the Law of Moses. Loving God and loving our neighbor isn't a New Testament innovation; Christ says it comes from the Law. But equally important are the words of verse 40 when Yeshua says that all of the Torah (the Law) and the Prophets are built upon the foundation of these two bed-rock God-principles. That means that the 10 Commandments rest upon loving God and loving our neighbor. The 10 Commandments are the 10 basic divine statements about how we show love to Our Creator and to our fellow man. And then the remaining 600 + laws of the Torah rest upon the 10 Commandments, each of them a nuance or a case study of one or another of the 10 Commandments and each giving

important instructions regarding everyday circumstances, behaviors and predicaments and showing us how to love God and love our neighbor in the midst of our circumstances. But if however we take these laws to mean and to live out is not done in an attitude of sincerely loving God and loving our neighbor, then we've more than missed the mark; we have not attained nor recognized the standard for righteousness that the Law was created to show us. This is precisely what Paul is accusing the Jewish Believers of Rome of doing and he's reading them the riot act because of it. They of all people should know better, because as Jews they have had every advantage and especially they have had the Law in their midst for 1300 years.

So in verse 25 Paul now takes direct aim at the bull's eye of pride of these Believing Jews of Rome: their circumcision. They have leaned on their circumcision, depended upon it as proof of their righteousness, and that was never what was intended by God. Now I'm going to step on some toes. Within the Messianic and Hebrew Roots movement is this insistence among many that they are Torah observant and you should be as Torah observant as they are, in the standard they set, or you are less pious than them. This is the 21st century version of Paul's rant in Romans about Jews and their wrong-minded pride and reliance on being physically circumcised (indicating to them a national attachment to Judah, and a belief that being Jewish made them righteous). Let me tell you something: no one is Torah observant. And that goes for the most fastidious Ultra-Orthodox living in Israel as well. For one thing, about one-third of the Torah is directly dependent upon altar sacrifices, a Temple and a Priesthood, none of which exists. For another, many of the commandments are nearly impossible in today's world under today's laws and governments. This idea of demanding supposed rigid Torah observance according to the standards of some particular group almost always incorporates mostly **Halakhah** along with a healthy dose of personal preference, and very little of the Biblical Law of Moses.

Does that mean that after years of saying otherwise that I'm now saying we should not obey the Law of Moses? As Paul would say, "Heaven forbid!" I'm saying that we need to be humble enough to realize that as hard as we may sincerely try, and should try, we simply can't do it all and insist that we are Torah observant because in some cases circumstances prevent it, although in other cases (such as Kosher eating) it can be done rather easily. In other cases laws are stated in an ancient cultural idiom that no longer exists, and we're not even sure how those particular laws were carried out in ancient times.

At the other end of the scale, I must also say that any excuse for saying that since some laws can't be done then that means we don't have to do any of them is based on poor Bible scholarship. There has never been in a time in Israel's history from the moment they received the Law on Mt. Sinai, that they could do every single law precisely as written. Some laws were entirely circumstance related; some couldn't be done until Israel crossed the Jordan and settled in Canaan. Because of the fall of mankind and the inherent fallen nature of the world, many times one law would inherently conflict with another in their non-ideal world, just as it does in our non-ideal world. Once the Israelites got to Canaan there were other circumstances that prevented some laws of being carried out as written. They couldn't carry out all the Law in exile, but the Scriptures make it clear that they were never excused from doing the parts of the Law that they could do, especially as regarded morality and worshipping God. If the principle is

that every single one of the 600 laws and commandments must be doable to its fullest at the current moment or none are enforceable, then never has the Law been enforceable. But of course the Bible makes it clear that that has never been God's attitude, instruction, or standard.

Even so, as we have learned that the Law is not abolished and as Believers in Christ we are indeed to obey it as best as can be done, we do it not to attain salvation but rather in obedience as the redeemed lifestyle of one who has been saved by grace. We must also not stand in judgment of others because they do the Law somewhat differently than we do, or perhaps don't do what we strongly believe they ought to do. And we must always carry out our desire to obey the Law in light of what our Messiah and Lord taught us: do the Law in the spirit of love, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and do the Laws for the purpose and pattern they were intended, which is to do them in far more than merely the ritual or the letter.

So in verse 25, after Paul seems to almost shame the Jews for even having a circumcision, he backtracks a bit and says that circumcision certainly has value, but only when you do what the Law says. Of itself, without accompanying proper behavior, you might as well have your circumcision undone. On the other hand, verse 26 says that if an uncircumcised man (a gentile Believer) lives his life by doing what the spirit and standard of the Law requires, won't it be as though he was one of God's set apart people: a Jew? In fact, this gentile Believer will act as a kind of judgment against a Believing Jew who knows all about the Law and in obedience to the Law has received a circumcision, but chooses not to be obedient to much of the remainder of the Law.

Then we get one of the more controversial and difficult statements so far: verse 28 has Paul saying that a true Jew or a real Jew isn't one who has merely had a circumcision in his flesh; but as it turns out, that's about as far as his faith takes him when it comes to doing the Law. And in fact, the point of circumcision is not about an operation in the flesh, but rather it is an important spiritual issue. Circumcision was always meant to be an outward sign of an inward spiritual condition. And the internal condition was to be a circumcised heart.....spiritually speaking, not literal. So a gentile Believer who trusts God and strives for the standard that the Law demonstrates, and does it with a sincere, loving, contrite heart, is more of a true Jew than a Jew who has had a circumcision and knows the Law backward and forward but doesn't do the Law or have a good spirit about whatever part of it he does do.

What is a "real Jew"? This has been debated endlessly. But clearly to Paul the standard of whether a person is or is not a "real Jew" is a spiritual measure and not a physical measure. So as it allows for the idea that a Believing gentile should be counted as a "real Jew" in the sense that Paul means it, I agree with that concept. But as Paul says clearly, it is meant purely in a spiritual sense and not in a literal sense. So it is not that a God-fearing gentile becomes a physical Jew or even a national Jew. A Believing gentile does not suddenly have the right to immigrate to Israel as a Jew. It is also not that gentiles replace physical, national Jews. And it is not that gentiles suddenly acquire a Hebrew heritage or supernaturally find themselves with Israelite genes. Rather it is that Israel (and therefore Jews) was always about reflecting spiritual ideals of God's set apart people, whose main task was to serve God and bring about His will on earth. God was faithful to them; Israel was not faithful to Him. From the time

Abraham was set apart, it was made clear that a gentile, by declaring Abraham's god as his own god, could become part of the set apart people. Essentially all any gentile does to come to the Lord, even in modern times, is to declare that Abraham's god, the God of Israel, is his or her God . Although I truly doubt that most gentile Christians even realize that that is what they're doing when they accept the Lord.

Because by Paul's day the term Jew had become more of a national title that also includes a national religion (Judaism), I think I much prefer, and wish Paul had used, the term "true Israelite" rather than "true Jew". Because I think Israelite is closer to what he actually intended. Technically it was Israel that was meant to embody God's ideal of a set apart people for Himself; not Jews per se. But, once again, Paul of course speaks in the idiom of his day and in his day no one talked any longer about Israelites or Hebrews; those were more or less dead terms. Rather it was only about the remnant of the Israelites, the Jews.

Let's move on to Chapter 3.

But before we do let me briefly set the stage. First, there should never have been a chapter break at this point; it completely disrupts the flow and to most Believers it has the force of separating what is being said in chapter 2 from what is being said to begin chapter 3. Second, the first few verses of chapter 3 answer the obvious burning question just left hanging at the end of chapter 2. And the question is this: If Israel (and the Jews) are God's covenant people. And if circumcision is the God-required sign of the Abrahamic Covenant and one of the laws of the Mosaic Covenant. And if God Himself has divided the world's population into two groups: Hebrews and everybody else and circumcision is a required ritual to be identified as a Hebrew. Then after everything Paul has just said about gentiles and Jews being equally liable to sin in God's eyes, and therefore being equally liable to God's wrath, what is the point of being a Jew? Why continue with male circumcision as a required sign of being Jewish? Has, indeed, the advent of Christ changed the entire dynamic and indeed God has backed away from His old covenant people, the Hebrews, and become instead the God of the new covenant people, gentile Believers? Or just as profound, has God abolished the distinction that once existed between Hebrews and gentiles?

READ ROMANS CHAPTER 3 all

Paul, the Rabbi, in typical Talmud style, then asks the question at hand that is intended to lead to a religious ruling. The question is: "Then what advantage has the Jew?" Of course the question means: then considering what has been previously said, what advantage does a Jew have over a gentile....if any? Does it still mean anything to become a member of God's covenant people? Now if gentile disciples of Christ answered this question after reading what Paul just said about the equality of Jews and gentiles in the first 2 chapters of Romans, with Paul even seemingly berating his fellow Jews over the matter of circumcision, then we would be compelled to answer, "No advantage whatsoever". And, I'm sad to say, that is generally what a good portion of the Church has done. It would intellectually dishonest to not admit that if there really is no advantage for being a Jew, if there is no benefit from being circumcised, this can only mean that the words of the Old Testament are a false witness or that God is not the faithful husband to Israel that He always claimed to be. As the renowned Bible commentator

Charles Cranfield once courageously said about this passage: “The question raised here is nothing less than the question of the credibility of God.”

Let me paraphrase that. If throughout the Torah and the Tanakh (the Old Testament) God could claim an ongoing faithfulness to His people, even in the face of their faithlessness to Him, and promise them that He would be their God forever. If God could establish a set-apart people, lead them into 4 centuries of slavery in Egypt, rescue them and give them the Torah, guide them through a forbidding wilderness to their own land, and offer them a justice system that promised atonement for their sins and that this justice would be forever, and then abandon it all and give it instead to Israel’s enemies, the gentiles, what sort of God is this? Why should we believe the promises of the New Testament that are supposed to be “forever” if God could simply extend it to His worshippers and then pull it all back from us if He gets upset enough or changes His mind? Cranfield is essentially posing the question that I posed in my introduction to Genesis many years ago.

Christianity honestly believes that God broke His promises to Israel, revoked not one but two covenants that He said would be forever (the Abrahamic and the Mosaic Covenants), and then made a new one, with a new set of rules, and gave it to gentiles. So if this is possible, if indeed that happened, why should any of us believe that at some point God might not revoke the new covenant, and give us a yet newer one with entirely different terms from the previous two? One that perhaps doesn’t even involve Christ? The good news is that this long held Christian premise is a false one simply based on an anti-Jewish prejudice. God did not abrogate any of His covenants; He has stayed completely faithful to His Word and gives us no reason to suspect that He won’t always be faithful to His Word.

Paul, the articulate Rabbi, even nuances his question to the straw man a bit more by asking a second one; he says, “What is the value of being circumcised”. So the issue of circumcision for Believers is back on the table. And he answers it: “Much in every way”. Suddenly the entire dynamic of Paul’s diatribe begins to come into focus, and it is not what we might have expected given what was said in chapters 1 and 2. We’ll look at where Paul now seems to be heading, next time.