
Prayers

To God

Write down a few words of thanks to God for what happened yesterday. Nothing fancy; do it just as if you are writing to someone you know and love. Look at what you have written and make it a pray from your heart.

For Self

Lord God, our Father, we take hold of the life You have given us with joy. For You have graciously saved us from becoming trapped by sin and evil. Alert us now to our frequent vulnerabilities, for the enemy will often come on us unawares. Give us the courage to turn away from evil, and accept the gracious gifts You give which lead us into all truth and love. We pray this in the name of Jesus: AMEN

For others

As you hear the news, take one of the subjects and delve a little deeper into its subject matter, for example, do a quick internet search to check out some facts. Let your prayers for this come from a deeper knowledge base than what you know from news.

Meditation

Can you hear the glory of the Lord?

Can you hear His presence all around you?

He is in the roar of a great and mighty river
and the gentle bubbling of a mountain stream;

He is in the majestic sound of a symphony orchestra
and the rich resonances of a human voice;

He is in whispered words of loving tenderness
and the secrets shared between two lovers;

He is in timely and generous words of support
and quiet respect when shown to a friend;

He is in the delicious burbling of a tiny child
and the empathic reaction of mother and father;

He is in the glorious quiet of an open field
And the hint of a sound in a butterfly's flight ...

Listen ... He is here ...

Bible Passage

Romans 2:17-29

¹⁷ Now if you call yourself a Jew, you put your trust in the Law, take pride in God, ¹⁸ know His will and discern what is best because you have been taught the Law, ¹⁹ and if you are sure you are a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having all necessary knowledge and truth within the Law, ²¹ why then do you teach others and not teach yourself?

You who preach 'do not steal'; why do you steal? ²² You who forbid adultery; why do you commit adultery? You who detest idols; why do you commit sacrilege against the temple? ²³ You who boast in the law; why do you bring shame on God by breaking the law? ²⁴ Indeed, it is written, '*God's name is blasphemed by the Gentiles because of you!*'

²⁵ Circumcision may have value if you keep the law; but if you break the law, you become like one uncircumcised! ²⁶ So then, if the uncircumcised keep the Law, should not their uncircumcision be as good as circumcision? ²⁷ Those who are uncircumcised and yet keep the law will then condemn you who have both the scriptures and circumcision, but who break the law. ²⁸ Look, being a Jew is not about outward appearance, and true circumcision is not merely physical and external. ²⁹ Instead, a real Jew is identified inwardly and real circumcision is of the heart; it is spiritual not legal, and such a person receives God's praise, not that of others.

Bible study Review

With these words, Paul seems to explode with indignation against His own people, the Jews. After starting his letter to the Romans with a broad sweep of historical analysis, he now continues his focus on his own people, who have, in his opinion, become an obstruction to God's work. We have already seen something of Paul's feelings about this in the first sixteen verses of this chapter, but here, his frustration overflows. He attacks the very heart of Jewishness, the Law (2:17-24), circumcision (2:25-29), and argues they are ineffective and indeed, a delusion. It is painful reading.

This is a substantial passage, but within each part there are hints of further interest, and we will pick up some of these later on, in 'going deeper'. The main theme however is very clear, the Jews have failed in their mission to be a '*light to the Gentiles*' (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6) and the covenant of God with the Jews has come to mean little. Those who first read this letter would have been in no doubt as to Paul's message here. We cannot find the answer to the human condition of sin within the Jewish religion per se. We must look elsewhere, and as Paul develops his case, we must make a mental note that he will deal more fully with the question of what happens to the Jewish people elsewhere (partly in chapter 4 and mostly in chapters 9 to 11).

The dramatic conclusion of Paul's case here is that whatever arguments may be made for the special nature of the Jewish people, those who are '*real Jews*' and the '*chosen*' people of his

own day are identified 'inwardly' (2:29). God knows His people from their 'hearts', not from either their outward observance of His laws or their physical condition as circumcised. He is arguing against every fibre of Jewish intellectual and religious thought. His analysis is devastating; the Law is irreconcilably useless (2:17-24) and circumcision is not what it has been made out to be (2:25-29). Is he really turning the clock back on more than a thousand years of Jewish Biblical scholarship and understanding of God's Law? The answer is 'yes'.

In verses 17 to 24, Paul writes as if addressing Jews personally. He lists all those things of which any Jew would have been proud; being God's chosen people, having 'the Law' and all its teaching (2:17-21), but then describes graphically how useless it is to merely know what sin is if it cannot be prevented. He accuses Jews of flagrant stealing, adultery, idolatry and law breaking (2:21-24). What a devastating blow to Jews who were doing their best to live good lives! But his point is that having all these things has not made God's people any better than other people in the world, and we can almost imagine the shock and horror some would have felt at this attack. Perhaps he speaks from his own past experience of anger division, greed and apostasy within Jewish circles when he says '*why do you teach others and not teach yourself?*' (2:21). If God's people are not able to keep His law, then how can they represent God in the world? False representation of God is blasphemy (2:24)!

Now at this point, any Jew would complain to Paul that his point is exaggerated. Most believed that the Jews were God's people through their practice of circumcision (2:25f.). Now a fuller discussion of circumcision and Paul's refusal to accept this as defining God's 'choice' comes in chapter 4. But for now, Paul argues that any Jew who breaks the Law, and he undoubtedly believes that all do, in so doing denies their circumcision. This enable him to turn the argument on its head by suggesting (as he did in yesterday's passage) that uncircumcised people might be capable of doing right by God's Law, quite naturally (2:26)! Consequently, Gentiles should be regarded as circumcised, at least 'in the heart', and thereby capable of being chosen as God's people. He reasserts; God does not identify His people by physical signs; He looks at the heart (2:29).

We may find all this a tedious argument, but it is highly instructive. Early Christians were confused about the difference between Jews and Christians; many felt that one faith had come from the other, and they slipped between the two religious systems almost without noticing. Paul set out to draw the markers between the two, ensuring that ultimately the Christian church was completely separated from Judaism. Yes, he was a Jew himself, but he had been converted, and however much he valued his Jewish background he valued Christ the more. The old ways of Judaism were no longer God's ways, and Paul made sure that everyone knew it.

Going Deeper

The need to deal with the teaching of Judaism within the early church

In Paul's day, there were many teachers who taught that it was necessary for Christians to be fully compliant with the Old Testament Law and Covenant. In addition, they insisted that converts be circumcised, because in the Old Testament, the only scripture available at the time, a relationship with God was established through this ancient practice (see Genesis 17). Moreover, they added to this the burden of acceptance of traditional rabbinic interpretations of the law, written down in documents such as the 'Mishnah' and the 'Talmuds' (written from the third century BC onwards).

This was a strong message with an apparently solid Biblical background, and it is no wonder that many accepted it. Yet in his evangelism, Paul fought tirelessly against it, as we can see in almost every letter he wrote (e.g. Galatians 3:1f. and Philippians 3:2f.), and he insisted to all that becoming a Christian did not require circumcision. Paul did not win this argument alone, of course. It was God's will that the old ways of Judaism should be left behind as the church of Jesus Christ grew. Circumcision was not God's plan for the church and God would surely have dealt with it one way or another (see also Acts 15 and 18). Throughout his ministry Paul had to argue this against the popular view of faith as held by other preachers.

Many sharp disputes occur today because of differing interpretations of Scripture, but we should learn from how Paul deals here with this matter. Looking at Romans as a whole and also his other writings about the Law and circumcision, Paul was always careful to prove his case from scripture, and we do well to follow his example.

The responsibilities of being a Jew and testifying to God in the world

Paul's attack was on Judaism as a whole, not individual Jews however much they may have disliked his views. His point was that the Jewish people as a whole presented themselves to the world as those who possessed within their culture the true revelation of God. Consequently, and as Paul highlights here, if any of them fell short of this high moral stance, their standing in society would have been severely cut back. The Jews did indeed claim to be *'leaders of the blind'* (2:19), and Paul's despair at their failure is similar to that of Jesus, who called them *'blind guides'* (Matt 15:14, 23:16).

We can easily see why Paul would drive home his point by quote the moral laws about stealing and adultery (2:21,22), for they were common sins affecting Jews society as much as Gentiles. However, the third item here is more interesting; *'You who detest idols; do you commit sacrilege against the temple?'* What does Paul mean? Why should he accuse the Jews of unholy or blasphemous activity in the temple? There is however one possible explanation. In one of the earlier studies, we observed that the church at Rome probably had few Jews in it because the Jews had been expelled from Rome. This happened frequently in the first century; for example, the Jewish historian Josephus (Antiquities, 18:81-84) records an occasion when a noble made a large contribution to the Jerusalem temple, and when this was embezzled, he persuaded the Emperor to throw the Jews out of Rome. Incidents like this brought the whole Jewish nation into disrepute, and probably lay behind Paul's accusations here.

Paul responds to this by quoting loosely from Isaiah 52:5 *'God's name is blasphemed by the Gentiles because of you'* (2:24). This was a constant theme of the Old Testament, and all the major prophets made similar points, as in this example from Ezekiel:

'But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name ... Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes' (Ezekiel 36:20-23)

The truth about circumcision, and why it is for Jews and not Christians

Despite the lack of much detail about circumcision in the old Testament beyond Genesis 17, the connection between this and the Covenant with God was very strong. However, many nations

around Israel also practiced circumcision, and it was by no means a unique 'sign' in the time of Abraham, let alone later on. There are plenty of Old Testament references however to *'circumcision of the heart'* (Deut 10:16, 30:6, Jer 4:6, Ez 44:7, Jer 31:31, Ez 11:19, 36:26), so Paul is thoroughly entailed to make his point. The Egyptians practiced circumcision, which is why Moses emphasised its spiritual nature in Deuteronomy. We must also remember that when the Bible talks about the 'heart' it does not mean 'emotions', as we might think today. Rather, the 'heart', in Hebrew, was regarded as the seat of a person's will, their 'decision making centre' or the 'will'. So when Old Testament scriptures speak of being *'circumcised of the heart'* it means being totally committed to God by doing His will and keeping His Law!

In Paul's day, however, circumcision had become far more than this. Throughout the Roman Empire there were people who genuinely admired the beliefs and life of the Jewish people, and the leaders of the synagogues in various towns of the Roman Empire insisted that when male non-Jews expressed a formal interest in being a part of the Jewish community, then they should be circumcised. In the first century, there were many secular authors who, when writing about the Jews, called them 'The Circumcised', so close was the connection between the rite and the Jew's self identity, and it was its being a badge of identity to which Paul objected so strongly. God's people were supposed to take their identity from God, not from a physical mark in the flesh of men.

So when Paul argued that circumcision was not a *'matter of outward appearance'* (2:28) he was not arguing against scripture, but against the prevailing attitudes of the day which made an idol out of God's gift of circumcision. Yes, the people who supported circumcision could quote Genesis 17 as its Scriptural source, but Paul had an abundance of other Scriptures to support his case (2:26-29), and we will learn more about this when we read chapter 4 of Romans. Consequently, Paul's opponents had made a god not just out of circumcision, but out of the Scriptural text upon which this was based, which is why Paul uses the ancient principle 'Scripture interprets Scripture' to argue that *'real circumcision is a matter of the heart, it is spiritual ...'* (2:29).

God knows the real Jews!

In an interesting twist to the end of this passage, Paul says about those who were circumcised of the heart, that *'such a person receives God's praise not that of others'* (2:29). What is hidden from our eyes yet gives meaning to this comment is the fact that the Hebrew word for 'praise' is 'yadah', and this related to the name 'Judah', from which the name 'Jew' comes (when Judah was born, his mother Leah said *'this time I will praise the Lord'* – Gen 29:35). This last sentence is therefore a slightly coded way for Paul to say 'it is God who sees the real Jew!'

Application

Discipleship issues

Good reasoning

Understandably, all these arguments about Judaism and circumcision can appear to be boring for Christians today, however important they were for the people to whom Paul was attempting to explain the Gospel. We must accept however, that Paul's successful defence of the freedom of the Christian Church was very important, for its mission amongst the wider Roman Empire and beyond needed to be free of domination by Judaism. Paul's defence was based upon

good reasoning and the proper use of Scripture to interpret Scripture. It was also based upon a formal decision of the Church, which met in Jerusalem under Peter (Acts 15) in full council, to agree with Paul that circumcision should not be required of the Gentiles. These three principles of good reason, the use of Scripture and the blessing of the Church (God's people), remain fundamentally good principles upon which to base decisions about matters of faith and doctrine.

The starting point of Gospel declaration

At the end of chapter 2 of Romans, we have arrived at the point where Paul has successfully argued the equality of all people before God. Everyone is equally in need of His gracious favour and salvation. To this day, this is the starting point for the proclamation of the Gospel. Today, we have the same task of persuading people of their need of God's grace, even though it must be in different ways.

Our problem today is that most people think they are superior and do not need either God or religion. Indeed, the secular argument against Christianity today is that people have 'grown up' and do not need the 'prop' of religion. In the face of problems and even evil, they suggest that we can fend for ourselves. Frankly, this is a patronising attitude and it beggars belief. In matters of morality we cannot say that humanity has grown over the centuries, and the growth of civilisation has not been matched by growth in maturity or goodness. Indeed, the extent of bribery and corruption in the secular world today is extraordinary; it feeds daily newspapers and magazines across the world and demonstrates the point perfectly. All people are in need of help to deal with sin, no less now than at any time in the history of the world. This remains true, even though circumcision has little to do with all this today.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *In what ways do you demonstrate to people that you are a Christian? Do you have a sticker in your car, or do you wear some kind of badge? Do you appreciate seeing others who have such labels, and what do you feel about making it known to everyone that you are a Christian? Pray about whether you need to be more open about your faith.*
- *Over a period of time, pray for God's people, the Jews, based on what you have learned about them from scripture. If you have a Jewish friend, this may help you pray more intelligibly.*

Questions for groups

1. How important is it for any group of people to have an 'outward sign' that demonstrates their allegiance? What 'outward signs' represent Christians?
2. Discuss the place of Jews in the life of the Church today. Do they have anything unique to offer God's people the church?
3. What controversial Christian beliefs today that are based on only one or two passages of Scripture? Can Scripture always help us to interpret Scripture?

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, conquer our fears, have victory over our inhibitions, dispel our doubts and calm our failing nerves. Then, when we have found our peace in You, may we praise You for who You are with all our being, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN