
Prayers

To God

Father Almighty, You have given us a Spirit of Praise! We praise You for creating this world and giving life to those of us who live in it. We praise You for the saving work of Jesus Christ that overcomes sin and evil in this world. We praise You for the joy and love we find in our relationships, and we praise You for Your eternal glory and power, revealed to us through Your Word. May the Spirit of Praise never leave us! AMEN

For Self

Praise God for His guidance through the years!
Praise God for the people you have shared your life with!
Praise God for the place He has given you to live
Praise God for the work he has given you to do.

For others

Intercede for those who are refugees
Intercede for those who have no home
Intercede for those who are alone or need help
Intercede for those who are at the end of life

Meditation

When I wander down the wrong road,
You are always there one step ahead of me,
Creating another route back to Your pathway.

When I cry the tears of loss or strife,
You are always ready with a touch of love
Drawing my simple soul back again, to life.

When I slip upon the stony ground,
You are always there raising me up again
And soothing my bruised ego with a quiet word.

When I let myself jump too far ahead,
You are always there to take the impact
Redirecting my energies again, so graciously.

When I am too keen to claim my credits,
You are always there holding me back, so I may
Give the glory to the One who made me what I am.

Bible Passage

Romans 3:9-20

⁹ So then, what advantage can anyone have? for we have already made the accusation that all are under the power of sin, both Jews and Gentiles; ¹⁰ as it is written:

'No one is righteous,
not even one.'

¹¹ 'No one understands,
no one seeks God.

¹² All have turned away
and become worthless as well;
No one does what is good,
no, not even one.'

¹³ 'Their throats are like open graves;
they use their tongues to deceive.'

'Snake's venom is under their lips.'

¹⁴ 'Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.'

¹⁵ 'Their feet are quick to shed blood;
¹⁶ Their path contains ruin and misery,
¹⁷ and they do not know the way of peace.'

¹⁸ 'There is no fear of God in the sight of their eyes.'

¹⁹ Therefore, we now know that whatever the law says, it addresses those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced throughout the world and be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For no one will be justified in His sight by doing the law, because through the law we gain knowledge of sin.

Bible study Review

In our passage today, we come to the climax of Paul's long description of the power of sin. He repeats the main thrust of his argument, which is summarised in the famous quote, '*all are under the power of sin*' (3:9). Having written extensively about this in the previous two chapters, Paul now justifies his conclusion by quoting from the Old Testament (3:11-18). This takes up the majority of our passage today, which concludes with comments about the way Jewish law accurately identifies sin but offers no answer to it (3:19-20)!

This is a significant passage, and it is frequently quoted by preachers explaining the need for salvation as part of an explanation of the Gospel. The point is this; once we have shown that sin has a universal stranglehold over all people, as in this passage, the way becomes clear for the preacher to explain that it is dealt with uniquely by Christ in His death and resurrection (and we will read about this in tomorrow's reading). Perhaps nowhere else in scripture is this essential base understanding of the power of sin so expansively and graphically put, both from reasoned argument and also from Scripture.

The word Paul uses when saying that all are '*under the power of sin*', means that a legal charge stands against us. He wants people to realise that they are dealing with a serious matter, indeed, something that will determine our eternal fate. Now, in Paul's day just as today, there were many who balked at this charge of universal sin, saying, 'surely, not everyone?' Jews claimed exemption because of their relationship with God; others said that being a very good person would surely suffice. Then, as now, it was only possible to go so far in arguing about such things, so to give a final answer to these questions Paul turns to the authority of Scripture.

At first glance, we may think Paul makes his case by quoting one long Old Testament passage (3:10b-18), but there is no such text. This passage is, in truth, a collection of quotes from the Psalms and Isaiah (in order, Psalms 14:1-3, 5:9, 10:7, Isaiah 59:7-8 and Psalm 36:1). The full texts are given later on in the study ('going deeper'), but it is relatively obvious how and why Paul has chosen them. Their common theme is the universal nature of human sin.

Some find Paul's compilation here very difficult because it gives no hint of redeeming qualities within human nature. But this is to miss the point. Paul has never said that people were incapable of being good; his point is that sin cannot be avoided, and contrary to our hopes, this is why evil is unleashed within people as individuals and humanity as a whole. Contrary again to popular thought, sin and evil are not abstract forces, they are a universal problem because of their ability to multiply, grow and entrap all people (see Romans 1). Moreover, as opposite to the intentions and morality of God for His creation, they represent everything that separates Him from both His creatures and His world. Paul's point is that none of us can escape this fact of life, and the question of how good we are is simply not relevant. We therefore need a solution to sin from God because we cannot find it of ourselves.

However, we must be careful here; it was part of Paul's culture to make a serious point by overstating it (and people do this even today). So in assembling these texts, he focussed on the universal power of sin and not the wider meaning of each passage. It would not be acceptable today to lump together passages like this without regard for their context, but this is the scripture we have and we must accept that it certainly makes a strong point. We do not have to try and work out any analogical meaning to '*snakes' venom*' (3:13), for example, to get the gist of his point. Roughly, no one is capable of maintaining good without falling into sin (3:10-12), second, the things we say are close to the heart of the sins which cause most of us to stumble (3:13-14), and the way we organise our lives is clear evidence that we have no peace with the God who made us, who we largely ignore (3:15-18).

It all sounds dire, and it is, because unless this is true there is no particular need for God to act in Jesus to save us from our sins. Sin is universal, as are its consequences, and we need to make this fact abundantly clear in any cultural setting before we can persuade people that God has an answer. The Gospel is not just a happy message about God loving us. It is a cutting edge, life and death matter by which we are saved from the consequences of our sinful nature.

Going Deeper

We will look now at how Paul makes this point in more detail, and we will examine all the quotes he used to emphasise it. There is much for us to learn from how he goes about his task.

All are under the power of sin!

At the beginning of verse 9, it is a little difficult to follow exactly what Paul is talking about when he says '*what advantage do we have?*' (3:9) Most versions of the Bible assume that Paul is talking about Jews, so your own Bible may well read '*what advantage does the Jew have?*' The translation I have given is consistent with one of the earliest papyri copies of Paul's letter, which implies that Paul was talking not about the Jews (as he was at the beginning of chapter 3) but following through what he was saying in verse 8 (see yesterday's study) about sin in general.

This is how his argument works. Paul had just been talking about people who thought that sin did not matter because more sin meant more of God's grace (see yesterday's study). Paul dismissed the idea, saying '*well, they deserve their condemnation!*' (3:8). So now, he continues by questioning whether anyone else, including himself, is really any better than those who make such foolish mistakes. All, he says, are under the same power of sin (3:9).

The scripture quotes

This is probably the most substantial example of scripture supporting scripture to be found in Paul's writing! The eight verses (3:10-18) are a compilation of four (possibly five) Psalms and a well known passage of Isaiah.

In analysing this, we should remember that in Paul's day, the Jewish people regarded the first five books of the Bible as 'Law', that is, the most important Scripture. This contained the core revelation of God in the stories of Creation, the stories of the Jewish forefathers (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob & Joseph), and the giving of the Law under Moses. Other writings such as the Prophets and the Psalms had different uses, but were regarded as documents God had given His people to help them explain and understand His Law.

It was therefore natural for Paul to turn to the Psalms and the Prophets to explain a point, here to illustrate the basic principle that all are under the power of sin.

Here are the full references. I have written them all out with those sections Paul used highlighted in bold:

Psalm 14:1-3 (the same as 53:1-3) ¹ *Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; **there is no one who does good.** ² *The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are **any who are wise, who seek after God.** ³ **They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.****

Psalm 5:9 *For there is no truth in their mouths; their hearts are destruction; **their throats are open graves; they flatter with their tongues.***

Psalm 10:7 **Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.**

Isaiah 59:7-8 **Their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation and destruction are in their highways. ⁸ The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; **no one who walks in them knows peace.****

Psalm 36:1 *Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts; there is no fear of God before their eyes.*

Proving a point

Some think that Paul used scripture incorrectly. The Psalms, for example, all describe the actions of the wicked, but if you read the rest of these psalms you will find that they speak elsewhere about those who are 'righteous'. Paul has been rather selective not just of the passages in general, but the sentences he chooses from them. So do these quotes really add up to show that every person in the world is under the power of sin? Most commentaries conclude that Paul's quotes are far from adequate to prove a point! However, they miss the subtlety of Paul's arguments.

Remember, Paul never says good people do not exist as well as bad people. His argument from this text however is that sin affects all people, even good people. Just as it is hard for anyone to read through the Ten Commandments and not realise they have slipped up somewhere, it is also hard to read this set of quotes without accepting that we may have fallen along the way. This is Paul's point.

In addition, Paul's quote from Isaiah is more refined than the rest. Those who know the book of Isaiah recognise that this prophecy comes in the final part of that great book, in which the prophet despairs of all God's people. For after exile to Babylon because of their national sins (see 2 Chronicles 36), and after returning to Jerusalem in repentance under Ezra, Nehemiah and Zerubbabel, the people continued to sin in the same way their ancestors did (as described in this quote)! Isaiah alone observed that God would have to act to resolve the ingrained rebellion of God's people by working through His 'servant' and establishing a new Kingdom (see Isaiah 59:17,21, 60:1f. and especially 61:1f.) So if you know the prophecy of Isaiah, Paul's point is crystal clear!

What does it mean to be justified under the Law?

Paul finishes by making a second important point that is sometimes forgotten because of the major significance of his explanation of the universal nature of sin and its power. This is the fact that the Law had in fact done its job, for however painful it had been for the Jewish people who attempted to live under it for centuries, the Law had exposed their sin for what it was. However, having said this, Paul jumps ahead of himself in verse 20. He seems to sit back from the intensity of his theological treatise and comment about what was, by the middle of the first century, a common Christian understanding of the Law. This was that having done its job with the Jewish people in Old Testament times, its purpose for the new People of God, the Church, was in fact still the same, to reveal the nature of sin; 'through the law we gain knowledge of sin' (3:20). Now, however, the work of the Law was not just for the Jews but for the entire world 'so that every mouth may be silenced throughout the world and be held accountable to God' (3:19). For us today, God's Law is still there in the Old Testament to tell us what sin is, and it is something we ignore at our peril.

Application

Discipleship issues

Accepting the nature of sin

Apart from following the twists and turns of Paul's theology, we can respond to this passage best by ensuring that we understand what it means to say that '*all are under the power of sin*' (3:9). Firstly, we should note that this says more than merely that all people are sinners. By saying '*... under the power of ...*' this phrase describes the source of sin as coming at least partly from outside people. People certainly instigate sin and evil, but they are also its victims. This passage should not therefore be used to preach the condemnation of everyone to hell, but also to be understanding of the real problems of living in this world. Paul understands that while everyone experiences good and bad in their lives, all are subject to the problem that sin poses by drawing us away from God. Too often, the evangelist can give the mistaken impression that God's judgement is insensitive to people's problems with sin, and this can have the difficult consequence of turning people away from a message that they wanted to hear.

Taking sin seriously

Neither is it right to downplay the seriousness of Paul's point by minimising the dire consequences of each and every act of sin, intentional and unintentional, which afflicts people in every state of life. Indeed, if we have been convicted by a passage such as this, then we should be willing to use the Law as given in Scripture so that we seriously work out what sin is and how it affects us. This is important. As Paul makes very clear in this passage and is also made clear elsewhere in Scripture, the purpose of the Law is to let us know what sin is, so that we are not misguided, or unintentionally unaware of some of the things we do that are wrong. We are often blinded to some issues because of the prevailing cultures in which we live, and we need God's Word to put us right. The Holy Spirit is our guide in this exposure of the reality of sin (John 15:26).

Tomorrow, we will see how Paul develops these two important points as he builds his theology of the Gospel and Christ's work of salvation.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- In what way is the enemy attempting to keep you under the power of sin, and how do you fight it? This is a hard question to ask, and one that even preachers find hard to ask in pulpits, but we must all face it especially if we read scripture. Take time to consider this and pray about this.
- As you live through a day, look at and watch the people all around you, some who you know and some you don't; and consider how and why it is that sin is all pervasive in society. What might lead us to this conclusion today?

Questions for groups

1. Look through the quotes that Paul uses and look up where they come from. Which one, in your opinion best serves his purpose?
2. How easy is it to explain to people today that we all fall under the power of sin?
3. Do people in the church today have an adequate understanding of what sin is, and if not, how can this be addressed?

Final Prayer

You, Lord Jesus, are closer to us than we can know. Your love and compassion surround us and sustains us even when we are asleep, and our souls have no knowledge of what You are doing. But you never stop caring, loving, and working for us and for our full salvation. We praise You, living Lord; AMEN