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## Romans 3:1-8 “Confronting the Questions of Unbelievers”

Intro. When students fail to get their homework done, they often offer a wide variety of excuses to avoid or minimize the consequences of their actions. Someone may say, “I was cleaning my room yesterday and I think I must have accidentally thrown it away while I was cleaning up.” Or, “My computer crashed and I lost all my work.” Or, “My Wifi was down and I couldn’t submit it by the deadline.” Or, “My mother must have put my homework in the recycling bin as she was gathering other papers.”

Even so, when people don’t want to be repent of their sin and trust in Christ as Savior, they offer excuses to avoid accepting responsibility for their sin and unbelief. One excuse is to offer objections in the teachings of the Christian faith. Some come up with some rather clever objections that may sound plausible.

Well as Paul went around as a missionary presenting the gospel, he would be confronted with objections to his teaching. Many times he had to defend his teachings and refute the objections of unbelievers. In many cases they were just looking for excuses to reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here in Romans it is as though the apostle were face to face with a heckler who interrupts him with questions and objections. Paul may be anticipating objections in the minds of his readers, and by joining in with the objector in asking the questions, he is able to carry him more safely through to the answer. Similar objections could arise in your own mind at some time, or they could come at Satan’s suggestion. Here, God is going to take away any possible excuse from man. He is going to patiently answer his questions and erase his excuses.

Today, there are increasing numbers of critics of Christianity. Some have become quite vocal. We must be prepared to answer our critics. Will you be able to defend your faith? (1 Peter 3:15). Well let’s look at some of the common questions about the Christian faith in Paul’s day, and see what applications we can make for today.

Now before we consider our first question, I want to give you a little background. In the last part of chapter 2 Paul said something that was very provocative and that would not go unchallenged. He taught that some Jews are not really Jews spiritually, and some Gentiles can really be Jews spiritually, even if they are not circumcised. Furthermore, he taught that external things like physical birth, possession of the Law, and circumcision do not offer any advantage if a person breaks God’s Law or does not trust in Christ as Savior. He refutes the Jews who commonly believed that their Jewish ancestry,<sup>1</sup> circumcision, and adherence to the law would ensure their ultimate entrance into the eternal kingdom of God, though they may suffer chastening for sin in this life.

Now Paul’s point in the broad context is to prove that both Jew and Gentile are guilty before God and need salvation. So this leads to the first question that Paul must have heard all too often from his fellow Jews:

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<sup>1</sup> They answered Jesus’ claim to set men free by saying, “We are offspring of Abraham...” (Jn. 8:33), and basically said they did not need Jesus to set them free.

## I. IS THERE NO ADVANTAGE TO BEING BORN A JEW?

That is essentially the question raised in v.1, “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?” Does the Jew gain anything<sup>2</sup> by being a Jew, or by being circumcised? To some, Paul was making it sound like there was no real advantage in being born a Jew.

So notice what Paul says here in reply to his critics. They were wrong to conclude that Paul was teaching that there is no advantage in being a Jew, for he says in v.2 that there is profit in being a Jew “much in every way!” (Πολὺ κατὰ πάντα). Then, after saying “To begin with” (πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ), we might expect Paul to list several advantages to being a Jew. He lists 8 advantages in 9:4-5, “to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God.” A Jew can rejoice in these advantages, and I believe we should show respect unto the Jew even today.

However, in this text Paul focuses on only one advantage that is of primary importance.<sup>3</sup> He goes on to say in v.2, “To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.” This (*logia*) literally refers to the sayings or pronouncements of God.<sup>4</sup> He is talking about the Word of the living God. It is likely that Paul has in mind all of the Old Testament and not just the Law.<sup>5</sup> Moses, the prophets, and other inspired writers received the Word of God and wrote down what God had revealed to them. So the Bible is not just a book. It is God speaking to man, and thus the ultimate standard of truth. Can’t you sense that reality as you read the Scriptures?

Now there are two main points I want to bring out about this advantage:

A. Israel Possessed the Word of God - God initially gave His Word only to Israel. Think of the wonderful advantage the Jews had in receiving and possessing the Word of God. The Word of God reveals God to us. The Word of God shows us the right path that we should follow. Israel had a pretty complete revelation of God’s will in the Law of Moses. The Bible imparts wisdom and drives out foolishness. The Old Testament Scriptures contained many wonderful promises to Israel and of the messianic hope. And Paul said in 2 Tim. 3:15 that the Holy Scriptures “are able to make you wise for salvation...” Having the Word of God gave the Jews a tremendous advantage in finding the way of salvation. So Paul elevated the Word of God to its rightful place of importance.

We need to recognize that we are in a similar position today. We live in America, where there are probably more Bibles/person than any other nation. What a blessing it is to have the Word of God! This is a privilege that many people in the world do not possess. There was a time not that long ago that our American culture was highly influenced by the Word of God. Sadly, that is no longer the case in most of our institutions.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the only place where this Greek word (*perisson*) is translated “advantage.” Elsewhere it is translated “more, beyond measure, abundantly, more abundantly,” etc.

<sup>3</sup> I say this based on Paul’s use of *proton*, which is used in Mt. 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God...” The word is used, not just of first in a list, but first in priority (Mt. 8:21; 12:29; 23:26; Mr 7:27; Lu 6:42; 14:28, 31; Ac 3:26; Ro 1:16; 2:9-10; 1Co 12:28; 2Co 8:5; 1Ti 2:1; 5:4). However, it is translated in the ESV as “To begin with.” The word is used as first in order in Mt. 17:27; Mr 4:28; Mr 16:9; Lu 21:9; Joh 18:13; Ac 7:12; 11:26; 1Co 11:18; 15:46; 2Th 2:3; 2Ti 1:5. References not given for those instances that could be interpreted either way. Even in uses interpreted as first in an order, we do tend to list items of first importance first!

<sup>4</sup> William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT & Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957). Barclay adds “pronouncements” (p.48).

<sup>5</sup> Though Barclay says it refers to the 10 Commandments, p.48. One could limit this statement to the actually words given by God such as the 10 Commandments.

Please note that Israel not only possessed the Word of God, but also:

B. Israel Was Entrusted (*pisteuo*) with the Word of God – That refers to placing something valuable in the hands of another for safe keeping and proper use. Imagine that an elderly scientist has finally found a cure for cancer, but he hasn't yet applied to the F.D.A. for approval. On his death bed he entrusts his son with all the information needed to eventually get the cure out and save millions of lives. What a responsibility! Surely, he would not just throw that research away. Even so, Israel was entrusted with the Word of God, which is able to save our souls. With privilege comes responsibility. They had a responsibility to preserve, protect, and teach the Scriptures. They were to pass the Scriptures down from one generation to another (Dt. 6).

However, they were not entrusted with the Word of God just for their own benefit. They were to share the truths of God's Word also with the nations. Tragically, the Jews were not faithful to the responsibility they were entrusted with. Though they did a good job of preserving the Scriptures, they failed in sharing the Scriptures with the nations unless Gentiles took the initiative to go to the temple or to the synagogue. They despised Gentiles and would have as little contact with them as possible other than business. Yet in spite of their overall failure, the world has received the sacred Scriptures through the Jewish people, and we should be thankful to them for that.

Today, this responsibility has passed on to the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is called in 1 Tim. 3:15, "a pillar and buttress of the truth." We possess *all* of the Word of God, including the New Testament. We must preach, teach, and distribute the Word of God. We need to support our missionaries abroad who are distributing Bibles in the native tongues of the people. Some of our missionaries are distributing Bibles to Ukrainian refugees. I have supported the work of the Gideons, who give of their time to give away copies of the Word of God.

But has the Church been faithful to this sacred trust? Not always! During the Middle Ages the Word of God was practically lost to the world. The time came when only the church leaders were permitted to read and interpret the Scriptures. God used the Protestant reformation to restore widespread distribution and teaching of the Word of God. But during the past 100 years much of Protestant Christianity has become unfaithful to the Word of God through liberalism. They are guided more by worldly influences than the Bible.

What about you personally? Have you been faithful to your responsibility toward the Word of God? Do you share the Word of God with others?

How do we apply this whole question to us today? Most of you were born in America, and most of you were born into a Christian home. You were probably brought up in church. Most of you were baptized, and you are affiliated with a church. Yet all of those things will not save you. So what advantage is there in being born in a Christian home? There are many advantages, but only if you make proper use of those advantages. For example, having the Word of God is a tremendous advantage, but only if you hear it, read it, believe it, and obey it. But if you reject the primary message of the Bible, which is salvation in Jesus Christ, then being born into a Christian home, having a Bible and affiliating with a church will do you no good. In fact, it will only serve to increase your condemnation!

So the first attempt to attack the Christian message failed. Don't try to make the Christian message say something it really doesn't say.

Now beginning in v.3, Paul anticipates another objection. These verses are truly a challenge for interpreters. If being a Jew has advantages, but does not automatically guarantee salvation due to unfaithfulness and disobedience, then what about God's faithfulness to keep His promise to save

and preserve Israel? So Paul acknowledged the problem of Jewish unbelief and unfaithfulness up front. He says in v.3, “What if some<sup>6</sup> were unfaithful?” Now this leads to the second main objection to the Christian message:

## II. WILL INFIDELITY NULLIFY THE FAITHFULNESS<sup>7</sup> OF GOD?

That’s what Paul says in the last of v.3. In other words, can their unbelief or unfaithfulness thwart God’s faithfulness to keep His covenant promises? Paul is going to deal with this subject much more fully in chapter 9-11 of Romans. God is faithful and reliable. He is true to His Word. Yet the Jews pretty much believed that the covenant faithfulness of God guaranteed their salvation regardless of their own unfaithfulness to their covenant obligations. If God did not ultimately save them, then in their mind God is unfaithful. The Jews faced a similar situation in the sixth century BC. When God did not defend against the destruction of Jerusalem and His temple at the hand of the Babylonians, many questioned the faithfulness of God. How could God allow His people to suffer under foreign tyranny? Yet they overlooked their own unfaithfulness which was the true cause of the disaster. Our unfaithfulness does not nullify the faithfulness of God, for God is also faithful to fulfill His warnings of judgment (see Dt. 28; 30:11-20). Nehemiah 9:33 rightly says, “you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.” Furthermore, God remained faithful to Israel in spite of their failures. He ultimately restored their nation.

So there is a connection between this question in v.3 and the advantage of the Jewish possession of the oracles of God. You see, the Scriptures contain many of the promises of God to Israel. Will Jewish unbelief mean that God will not keep His promises to Israel? Will the unfaithfulness of Israel make these promises “without effect?” Does human unbelief abolish or make void (*katargeo*) the trustworthiness of God to keep His promises?

Picture in your mind God up in heaven. He has made many wonderful promises to Israel. He fulfilled His promises to multiply the descendants of Abraham, to give them the Land of Promise, and most of all, to send a Messiah, a Savior. And yet, Israel rejected Jesus, and for the most part, did not believe in Him. Do you think He is wringing His hands, and fretting because His people will not believe that He has fulfilled His promise? Is God paralyzed by man’s unbelief and unfaithfulness?

Well notice Paul’s answer. He strongly objects in v.4 saying, “By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar....” Or this could be translated, “Let God be found true...,” that is, as men should perceive Him. He cannot even entertain the thought that God could be anything less than truthful and faithful to His promises. Paul says here that man should be considered to be the liar, not God. Man does indeed have a track record of lying, and breaking his promises, but not God. Paul’s reply is that man’s faithlessness never alters God’s faithfulness or frustrates His purpose. 2 Tim. 2:13 says, “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.” God’s purposes, plans, and promises are not dependent upon the response of any person or group of people. Unfaithfulness in man will not produce the same in God. The Jew failed; doesn’t that mean God failed? No. God’s promise to send Israel the Redeemer was not defeated. All His promises for the future of the nation of Israel will be fulfilled. The fulfilling of His promises does not depend on

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<sup>6</sup> Paul says “some” here to avoid being offensive, but the fact is, many Jews did not believe in Christ as the Messiah. Furthermore, God always has a remnant of true believers.

<sup>7</sup> “Faithfulness of God” is literally “the faith of God.” However, the same word is translated “faithfulness” in Gal. 5:22, and no doubt should be translated that way here.

the Jews. For example, God wanted to evangelize the world by means of the Jews. He said to Abraham in Gen. 22:18, “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed....” But God was not limited by their unbelief. There has always been a remnant in Israel (9:27; 11:5). That remnant spread the Gospel in Paul’s day, and God continues to have a remnant of Jews that believe to this very day. And when most Israelites did not believe, He turned to the Gentiles, and called out unto Himself a people who would compose the Church. They in turn helped to spread the gospel to the nations. The unbelief of some cannot thwart God’s faithfulness or eternal purpose.

Paul goes on to argue his point by quoting from Psalm 51, where David cried to God because of his great sins of adultery and murder. According to the last of v.4, David confessed his sins “That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.”<sup>8</sup> “Be justified” could be translated, “Be acknowledged righteous.” David acknowledges that there had been no failure in God. David took sides with God against himself. David himself said that God had the right to judge him and chasten him because of his sin. That’s why confession is so important. We are acknowledging that God is right, and we have been in the wrong. [Apply to the Lord’s Supper]. While the sinner always seeks to justify or excuse himself, a true believer is concerned with justifying God, declaring Him righteous in all His ways.

I’m afraid that there is widespread and growing unbelief even right here in America. But that is not going to thwart God’s promise to save souls from every tribe and nation. If He has to, He will raise up some other nation to complete the task. If this church drifts into liberalism or some other form of unbelief, we cannot nullify the faithfulness of God to keep His promises of salvation. He will raise up some other church this community to accomplish His purposes.

Once again, Paul has answered his critics. Jewish unbelief saddened his heart, but it did not affect his faith in the truthfulness and faithfulness of God.

Now Paul’s reference to the quotation in Psalm 51 brings up another problem. David had sinned greatly, and yet perhaps he became even more aware of the righteousness of God in light of his own sin. And this leads to the next question of the unbeliever:

### III. HOW CAN GOD JUDGE US FOR SIN WHEN GOOD COMES FROM IT?

Sinful man wants so badly to remove any accountability to God for what we do. Some just deny God altogether. Others look for ways to be exempt from the judgment of God. Here sinful man thinks he has found a way to be exempt. In fact, Paul refers to two different ways the sinner may feel he can weasel himself out of the judgment of God. He says in v.5, what “if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness<sup>9</sup> of God....” The word translated “serves to show” here also means “to bring out, exhibit, or sets off more clearly.” They suggested that God’s righteousness was more clearly exhibited by their evil, by way of contrast. Then, in v.7 someone questions what “if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory?” Again, the contrast between man’s bent toward lying and God’s truthfulness seems to make God’s truthfulness even more pronounced. If our unrighteousness magnifies God’s righteousness, and if our lies magnify the truthfulness of God, then why should He judge us? How *can* He judge us?

There is a progression of argument here. The Jew questions how God can be faithful to his covenant promise and still ultimately condemn him, even though he has sinned. After all, his sin magnifies God’s righteousness, and his unfaithfulness magnifies the faithfulness of God.

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<sup>8</sup> “You are judged” perhaps should be taken as a middle voice rather than passive, “enter into judgment.” On the other hand, the critics do seem to be sitting in judgment upon God!

<sup>9</sup> Moo observes that God faithfulness and His righteousness are parallel thoughts in Psa. 36:5-6.

Now based on this supposition, the critic makes:

A. Three Faulty Conclusions - In giving these faulty conclusions, Paul adds the words, "I speak as a man." He wants to make sure that everyone understands that he is speaking the thoughts and conclusions of certain men with twisted minds. These conclusions are not ones that he himself arrived at, and he seems to apologize for stating such questions. May the Lord help us turn away from such vain human thoughts!

1. Is God Unjust in Inflicting Wrath? That was the skeptic's conclusion in v.5, though Paul actually phrases the question expecting a negative answer (God is not unrighteous, is He...). This person is saying, "If my unrighteousness establishes His righteousness; why should He find fault with me? He is really the gainer by my sin; why should He exact retribution for it?" He would be condemning us for the very thing that magnifies the glory of His righteousness in judgment.

Next, the unbeliever asks in v.7:

2. Why Am I also Still Judged as a Sinner? - Oh, the audacity of the human heart which flinches not from attacking what it cannot comprehend! What is in the mind of a man who accuses God of injustice? It is, in reality, a claim to superior justice. It is the sin of Satan who wished to exalt himself into the place of God. It is not a request to God to share His throne, but to abdicate His throne and let someone else move in who knows how to carry on better than God Himself!

Finally, in v.8 someone asks:

3. Why Not Do Evil that Good May Come? – This is bringing their argument to its absurd conclusion. It is like saying, "The end, God's glory, is good; why is the means, my sin, counted wrong? Surely the end justifies the means?" This was similar to the argument projected by the legalistic opponents of Paul. They charged that Paul's teaching of salvation by grace would promote the attitude that we should go ahead and do evil that God's grace and mercy will be magnified (cf. 6:1). Some foolish thinkers rationalize their sin by saying that they can praise the wonderful forgiveness of God even more if they sin more often. Paul thus shows the shocking line of reasoning that the critics are ultimately leading to.

Here is a good test of any doctrine or movement: does it result in more sin and unbelief? If so, it is not of God.

Have you come up with a similar excuse for your sin or unbelief? Do you think that somehow you are going to find an excuse that will work on Judgment Day?

B. The Replies of Paul -

1. Abhorrence at the Thought – Paul says in v.6, "By no means!" Or Paul literally says, "May it never be!"<sup>10</sup> The end never justifies the means. He who sins never does it to the glory of God. Granted, in the wisdom and power of God, He is able to over-ride evil to serve His purpose. All the good that He can get from sin is to over-rule it to some divine intent and punish the sinner. Therefore, any such good cannot be credited to our sins, but to the over-ruling power of the Omniscient God. However, we should not even contemplate the thought that we should commit unrighteousness to somehow magnify the righteousness of God.

2. It Contradicts the Absolute Truth that God Will Judge the World – Paul says in the last of v.6, "For then how could God judge the world?" Paul is saying, "If your argument holds water, then everyone will have an excuse, and God will not be able to judge *anyone*, even wicked

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<sup>10</sup> That expression (Μὴ γένοιτο) is found some 10 times in just in Romans.

Gentiles! Yet that contradicts a fundamental truth. God must Judge the world, and He will do so in righteousness.” You can be sure that those who are condemned will fully deserve it, and they will be without excuse. Abraham understood the basic truth that the Judge of all the earth will do right (Gen. 18:25).

Notice that Paul appeals to the fact of universal judgment and he does not seek to prove it. There should be no need to. The Bible clearly reveals that God judges sin. Nature supports the belief that God judges sin. How else can you explain all the pain, suffering and death that is in our world? Our conscience confirms that God judges sin. We have that innate sense within us today, and God has put it there. And whoever you are, you do believe that at least *some* people ought to be judged. If sin can be excused in the way described, then God cannot judge anyone! Even someone like Hitler or Saddam Hussein could not be judged. Paul has reduced this argument to an absurdity, and it falls of its own weight. It is incomprehensible that a holy God will not judge sin. As surely as there is sin there must be judgment. If God cannot or will not judge, then all moral order will collapse. So once this fact is accepted, then all of the arguments and questions presented here fall to the ground.

3. Those who Suggest Such Things Deserve their Condemnation – Paul says in the last of v.8, “Their condemnation is just.” Condemnation in the judgment shall be just for those who reason that God is glorified by their sins, and who “do evil that good may come.” Their condemnation is just because such excuses for sin will not stand. If you think like that you had better realize that you have never been born again. A true Christian does not delight in sin. A true Christian does not seek excuses to sin more and more. If you play games with the Word of God, you can be sure your condemnation will be just. The Judgment Bar of God will be the ultimate “No Spin Zone.” If you think you can be clever with God and come up with excuses or objections that will get you off the hook, you had better think again.

Conclusion: You may not be offering the particular objections and excuses found in my text. But just because I have not hit on *your* objection or excuse does not mean that yours is valid. Don’t rely on excuses to exempt you from God’s judgment. When you stand before God on Judgment Day, not one excuse will work. So forsake vain thoughts that somehow God will not hold you accountable for your sin and unbelief. He will. Your only hope is to come to Christ, who bore your punishment on the cross for you! Today is the day of grace. Trust in Christ now, for the day will come when it will be too late.

Those of us who are Christians, we have been reminded of the fact that we have been entrusted with the Word of God, that saves souls, and helps believers grow in their faith. Are you being faithful to learn, believe, obey and share God's Word, including with unbelievers? May we be found faithful to what God has entrusted *to us!*

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957); Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2022; Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint); Leon McBeth, *Exegetical & Practical Commentary on Romans* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible*

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