

Lesson 31 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 3:1, Continued

Romans 3:1 — Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?

This first verse follows a discussion about circumcision in the previous chapter, but we should notice that Paul is no longer just talking about circumcision. Instead, Paul is now talking more broadly about the advantages of the Jews.

We can see that in the opening question of verse 1 — “Then what advantage has the Jew?” Yes, he then asks about the value of circumcision, but that first question shows us that Paul’s focus here is on being a Jew rather than just on the physical mark of being a Jew. And that understanding of verse 1 fits well with the previous two verses where Paul defined what it meant to be a Jew.

But that observation leads us to another question — when Paul refers to a “Jew” here in verse 1, is Paul using the definition of “Jew” that he just gave us? Paul just defined what it means to be a Jew, and now in the very next verse he mentions the word “Jew.” Wouldn’t we expect Paul to use the definition he just gave us?

We might expect Paul to do that, but I don’t think that is what he does. Instead, I think Paul is using what we might call the “outward only” definition of Jew here in verse 1.

Why? Because of what Paul will say next. He is about to tell us that the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God — and that was true about **all** the Jews. Paul will also talk about some Jews who were **un-**

faithful — which also suggests that Paul is not talking here about only those Jews who were both inwardly and outwardly Jewish.

And I think the fact that Paul continues to use the usual meaning of “Jew” in verse 1 shows us something important about verses 28-29 in the previous chapter. I think it shows us that Paul’s intention in those verses was to teach us a lesson rather than to redefine the meaning of “Jew” for all time.

So, even though Paul defined a true Jew in Romans 2:28-29, I think Paul is using the broader physical definition here in Romans 3:1. And so the question in verse 1 is whether there is any advantage to physically being Jewish. And the answer? Let’s keep reading.

Romans 3:2

Romans 3:2 — Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

The answer is yes! Much in every way! Jews have advantages in every way! But is that really surprising? After all, what did Paul tell us back in Romans 1:16?

Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, **to the Jew first** and also to the Greek.

To the Jew first? That sounds like an advantage, right? I think it is an advantage, and I think Jesus also told us about that same advantage.

Matthew 15:24 — He answered, “I was sent **only** to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Yes, Jesus was the promised blessing for the whole world, but Jesus was sent only to the house of Israel. And we see that in his earthly ministry. Except for a few notable exceptions such as the Roman centurion in Luke 7, Jesus proclaimed his message only to the Jews.

And then, when the Lord's church was established in Acts 2, Peter's first gospel sermon was proclaimed only to Jews — a situation that persisted up until the conversion of Cornelius.

So, yes, it does seem that the Jews had advantages that were much in every way, but Paul does not prove that here by pointing to the earthly ministry of Christ or to the initial proclamation of the gospel of Christ. Instead, the advantage Paul gives us here is that the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What does that mean?

Again, I think Paul has already answered that question. Earlier Paul described Gentiles who did not have the law — Gentiles who did not have the oracles of God — and yet some of those Gentiles still managed to follow the precepts of that law.

But the Jews? They **did** have the law of Moses. They **did** have the oracles of God. They **did** have the written code.

While the Gentiles could never really be completely certain about whether what they were doing was right, that was not true of the Jews. They could know exactly whether what they were doing was right because they had the written law of God. They could just look it up!

And what did that ability give to the Jews? It gave them a tremendous advantage. And, again, that is why Paul told us in the previous chap-

ter that a Gentile with no advantages who kept the precepts of the law would condemn a Jew with every advantage who broke the law.

And I think we also see a message here for those who would try to downplay the importance of letters and words based on what we saw last week in Romans 2:29. They should note that the very first advantage that Paul lists here is letters! The oracles of God are the words of God written with letters from God. Of all the advantages that Paul could have listed for the Jews as the chosen people of God, Paul starts with this one — they had the oracles of God! They had letters!

But, again, we see a combination of both advantage and obligation. We saw that same combination earlier with circumcision, and we see it again here.

Yes, the Jews had the great advantage of the oracles of God — but they did not just **possess** those oracles; Paul tells us here that they were **entrusted** with the oracles of God. The Jews had a great responsibility to both follow and safeguard the word of God that they possessed.

Did the Jews fulfill that great obligation? Yes and no, but mostly no — as we see in both the Old and New Testaments.

Amos 3:2 — You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.

Acts 7:52-53 — Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.

But there is a sense in which the Jews did fulfill that obligation. We talked about it earlier when we looked at the Great Scroll of Isaiah discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls. That scroll shows us how carefully the Jews preserved and relayed the word of God with which they had been entrusted. But while they were very good at preserving it, they were not very good at following it.

And so the great advantage here is that the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. And that great advantage is also described in the Old Testament.

Deuteronomy 4:8 — And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

Psalm 147:19-20 — He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the LORD!

And that is the first advantage that Paul lists here. Are there any other advantages? Yes, there are — but we need to look elsewhere to find them.

When Paul introduces this first advantage in verse 2, he does so with the phrase “to begin with” or “first of all,” which raises a question — where does Paul list the other advantages? They are not listed in the next verse or even in the remainder of this chapter. In fact, Paul won’t list the additional advantages until he returns to this subject in Romans 9.

Romans 9:4-5 — They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

So, yes, the Jews did have advantages in every way — but none of those advantages mattered when it came to obeying the gospel of Christ.

A modern day analogy might be the advantages that belong to someone raised in the church by godly parents. That person certainly has advantages in every way when compared with someone who was not raised in such a home. But when it comes to salvation in Christ, neither person has an advantage over the other. They both must obey the same plan of salvation, and they are both saved the same way and added to the same church when they both do that same thing.

My nephew, the track star, has an advantage in every way over me when it comes to running a race. But we would each start that race at the same place, and we would each finish that race at the same place (just not at the same time).

And so, yes, we know that there are more advantages than just this one listed here in verse 2, but we will save our discussion for those other advantages until we get to Romans 9.

Romans 3:3

Romans 3:3 — What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

It is at this point that Paul begins a diversion intended to deal with potential objections to his message, and this diversion from his main point continues through verse 8. If we skip down now to verse 9, we can see Paul's unbroken message:

- Verses 1-2: The Jews have advantages.
- Verse 9: But do those advantages mean that the Jews are better than the Gentiles? Not at all. All are under the same curse of sin. All are in the same boat.

But before we get to verse 9, we need to look at the potential objections that Paul describes in verses 3-8.

And the first potential objection is this: God promised to bless the Jews, but (based on what Paul just said) it sounds like some of the Jews will never get those promised blessings. Doesn't that mean that God is not doing what he said he would do?

Paul does not spell all of those details here, but we can infer the details of that objection both from what Paul does tell us here and also from what Paul will say later in Romans 9 when he considers these same objections in much greater detail.

Romans 9:31-33 — But that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled

over the stumbling stone, as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

That is the same objection that Paul is introducing here in Romans 3:3 — that the Jews were promised blessings, but some of the Jews had not received those promised blessings.

But why? Why had some of the Jews not received the promised blessings?

Paul answers that question here in Romans 3:3 and again later in Romans 9:32 — it was because they were faithless. They did not pursue the blessings by faith, but rather they pursued the blessings based on works. In short, they were trying to earn those blessings so that God would owe them those blessings.

But while Paul develops his argument slowly in Romans 9, Paul jumps there immediately here in verse 3 — “What if some were unfaithful?” — saving the details for his later discussion.

What is the impact on God’s plan if some of the Jews were unfaithful? God had promised to bless the Jews. Must God still do that for Jews who were unfaithful? And if God does not do that, then doesn’t that mean God has failed to do what he promised? That is Paul’s question in the second half of verse 3: “Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?”

As Christians steeped in the New Testament, this argument from the Jews does not seem particularly strong. We understand the conditional nature of many of God’s promised blessings, and so we understand that a faithless people cannot demand promised blessings from

God when those promises were premised on their faithfulness. They possessed the law of God — they should have read the fine print!

Deuteronomy 28:1-2 — **And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God**, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, **if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.**

But that was not the mindset for many Jews in the first century. They were more likely to see things this way: “God, I have worked for you all of my life to earn the blessings that you promised, and now you are jerking the rug out from under my feet! You are going back on the deal we made! You have changed the terms of our agreement! I was promised blessings! Where are they? And yes, even if some of the Jews were unfaithful, God was also unfaithful, either because he no longer wants to do what he promised or because he is no longer able to do what he promised. Either way, it looks like we both went back on our agreement.”

I think that argument is what we see here in verse 3 in a much abbreviated form: “What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?”

But, before we leave verse 3, we need to pause and look at two key words: faithfulness and nullify.

First, let’s look at the word faithfulness, which appears three times in various forms in verse 3: unfaithful, faithlessness, and faithfulness.

And we should add a fourth word to that list — the word “entrusted” that we find in the previous verse: “To begin with, the Jews were **entrusted** with the oracles of God.” And why should we add that word to the list? Because all four of those words come from the same Greek root word — entrusted in verse 2, and unfaithful, faithlessness, and faithfulness in verse 3. They are all forms of the same Greek word.

And what does that tell us? It tells us that God placed his faith in the Jews, but many of the Jews did not place their faith in God. It means that God placed his trust in the Jews when he gave them his oracles, but many of the Jews did not place their trust in God.

Although it is hard to see in the English translation, there are two contrasts in verses 2 and 3 — a contrast between the faithlessness of the Jews and the faithfulness of God, and a contrast between God’s faith in man and man’s faith in God.

And we in the church should note that the Jews were not the only people to whom God ever entrusted his word.

2 Timothy 1:13-14 — Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit **entrusted** to you.

And that brings us to our second key word in verse 3 — the word “nullify.” And the first thing we can say about “nullify” is that it is definitely one of Paul’s favorite words! We find that word used 27 times in the New Testament — all but one or two of which are in the epistles of Paul (depending on whether Paul wrote Hebrews). And the Greek word means to destroy, to bring to nothing, or to make void.

In short, if some of the Jews were faithless, then did that make God's promises void? Did it bring God's promises to nothing?

Paul answers that question with a very forceful "no!" in the next verse, but Paul also answers that same question in another of his epistles.

2 Timothy 2:13 — If we are faithless, he remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself.

And, of course, that is the same answer we find in the next verse.

Romans 3:4

Romans 3:4 — By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged."

"By no means!" That is Paul's answer to the question of whether our faithlessness to God means that God is faithless to us — that if we go back on our promises to God, then God will go back on his promises to us. "By no means!" "God forbid!" "Absolutely not!" "Heaven forbid!" "May it never be!" "Never!" Those are all translations of Paul's emphatic negative answer here in verse 4.

And to really drive that answer home, Paul changes the setting of his argument. In verse 3, Paul asks what if "some" were unfaithful. But, here in verse 4, Paul considers the possibility that "every one" is unfaithful. If it is unthinkable for God to go back on his promises if **some** turn out to be unfaithful, what about if **everyone** turned out to be unfaithful — then would God go back on his promises? No — same answer! "God forbid!"

God will be true to his word no matter what we do or how many of us do it. Every person on earth could be a liar when it comes to doing what they promised — and it would make no difference at all about whether God would be true to his promises. And that fact, of course, is something we also read elsewhere in the Bible.

Numbers 23:19 — God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

1 Samuel 15:29 — And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.

Titus 1:2 — In hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began.

Hebrews 6:18 — So that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

James 1:17 — Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

One could preach an entire sermon on the first half of verse 4 — “Let God be true though every one were a liar.” And I know that because I have preached an entire sermon on that verse — “Truth Decay” at StudyRomans.org. But instead, let’s move on and look at the second half of verse 4.

as it is written, “That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.”

And we definitely have some questions about that quotation! First, where was it written? Second, who wrote it? Third, why was it written? Fourth, how does it prove Paul’s point here — that God will be true even if every one is a liar?

Let’s start by answering the first two questions — the quotation comes from Psalm 51:4, and Psalm 51 is a psalm of King David. (And please see the Handout for Lesson 31 to read all of the verses from the Psalms that are quoted in Romans.)

Psalm 51:4 — Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

And why was that verse written? We find the answer in the heading of Psalm 51 — “A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.”

Psalm 51 is the famous Psalm in which King David pours out his heart to God while asking forgiveness for the terrible sins he committed in murdering Uriah the Hittite and taking his wife.

Well, the first three questions were easy — what about the fourth question? Not so easy. This question is difficult: how does Psalm 51:4 prove Paul’s point here in Romans 3:4 — that God will be true even if every one is a liar?

Let’s start by asking what Psalm 51:4 itself means — because that is not immediately clear. David says, “against you (God) ... have I sinned

... so that you (God) may be justified ... and blameless.” What does that mean?

The answer hinges on the Hebrew word translated “so that.” That Hebrew word can describe either a **purpose** (“in order that”) or a **result** (“with the result that”), and we have to rely on the context to decide which one is intended.

And, in fact, we can say the same thing about the English translation, “so that.”

- He stumbled **so that** he fell down. In that sentence, “so that” describes the **result** of the stumbling — what happened after he stumbled.
- He stumbled **so that** he would make people laugh. In that sentence, “so that” describes the **purpose** of the stumbling — why he stumbled.

The same is true of the underlying Hebrew word here — to decide between result and purpose, we have to look at the context.

And what does the context tell us? Is the context describing a result or a purpose? I think it must be describing a result. David is not saying, “I sinned with the purpose of making God appear justified and blameless.” But instead, David must be saying, “I sinned and, as a result of my sin, God was shown to be justified and blameless.” David is not telling us why he sinned (I think we already know that). Instead, David is telling us what happened after he sinned.

But how did David’s terrible sin cause those things about God to happen? It did so through David’s confession — David held nothing back.

He admitted to all that he had done so that, as a result, no one could ever doubt the truthfulness and the righteousness of God's judgment against David. David wanted the world to know that he completely deserved whatever punishment God imposed against him. No matter what God decided, that punishment from God would be completely justified and God would be completely blameless in imposing that punishment.

I think that explains Psalm 51:4, but when we jump back to Romans 3:4, we have another question. Why is the language in Psalm 51:4 so different from the language in Romans 3:4?

- (Psalm 51:4) ...so that you may be justified in your words and **blameless in your judgment.**
- (Romans 3:4) ...as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and **prevail when you are judged.**"

In Psalm 51 we have "blameless in your judgment," but in Romans 3 we have "prevail when you are judged." In the first, it looks like God would be blameless in whatever judgment he imposed, but in the second it looks like God would prevail when he was the one being judged. Those are two very different situations. Which is it? And how do we reconcile the two? I think there are two possibilities.