

# BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

by Mario Seigle

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## ROMANS 2-3 – AGAINST GENTILE SINS AND JEWISH LEGALISM

Is this incredibly profound epistle of Paul, he goes step-by-step through God's Plan of Salvation for the entire world--in about 11 written pages! He shows how the Gentiles, with all their vain religions, have completely missed the mark.

He says, "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting...Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. But we know that *the judgment of God is according to truth* against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?" (Rom. 1:28; 2:1-3).

The entire pagan world at that time, no matter what religious system they followed, were judged according to God's truths (including His moral laws) as having sinned and been condemned. Why haven't they already been punished by God?

Paul answers: "Or do you despise *the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering*, not knowing that *the goodness of God leads you to repentance*? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are *treasuring up* for yourself wrath *in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God*, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and *immortality* [notice that they *seek* it but don't have it yet]; but to those who are self-seeking and *do not obey the truth*, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, *of the Jew first and also of the Greek*; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God" (Rom. 2:4-11). So all are being judged by God.

Notice Paul says God's judgment is according to "the truth," which is *the Holy Scriptures*. Christ said, "Your Word is truth" (John 17:17). God has not punished the whole world because *of His kindness and patience*, as Peter also said, "The Lord... is

longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish [or be punished] but that *all* should come to *repentance* [the key point]" (2 Peter 3:9).

Also, Paul says faith must be accompanied *by works*, "For it is *not the hearers of the law* who are *righteous before God*, but *the doers of the law* will be justified [or made righteous]" (Rom. 2:13). Some will then ask: "How can the Gentiles, or those who do not know the law of God, be fairly judged and condemned?"

Paul responds everyone has, through their own conscience, a type of moral compass with a sense of what is right and wrong. All, without exception, have gone against their own conscience and done what is wrong, feeling the guilt. That is why they can now be condemned by God, but it is only a *temporary judgment*, *not* an eternal one. In the future, everyone will have an opportunity to truly know God's law, have their eyes opened to the truth, and then be spiritually judged to either end up having *eternal life for eternal death*--most in the Second Resurrection (Rev. 20:5, 11-12, 15).

Paul explains: "For when *Gentiles*, who *do not have the law* [of God], *by nature* do the things in the law [morally], these, although not having the law, are *a law to themselves*, who *show the work* [or results] of the *law written in their hearts*, *their conscience also bearing witness*, and between themselves *their thoughts accusing or else excusing them* [by the moral compass we all have] *in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ*, according to my gospel" (Rom. 2:14-16). So this means that in the future resurrections lie ahead.

Hence, in this life, all are condemned by their consciences, knowing in an elementary way what is good or bad. For example, murder, lying, stealing and adultery are condemned throughout the world. These things can be known *without* the help of God's Word, since there is a moral sense of what is right or wrong in every human being.

### **What about the Jew?**

So, the Gentile world is convicted by its own sins. But what about the Jew? They felt morally

superior to the Gentiles by having God's law. But were they exempt from God's condemnation?

They thought so. In Jesus' time, the Pharisees had distorted the Scriptures in such a way that they felt they were *justified* simply by being Abraham's descendents and having the seal to prove it--circumcision. They taught that through the "merits" of Abraham, justice was extended to all of his descendents. They said that even if a Jew was a criminal, if he was circumcised, Abraham's merits would save him from condemnation.

For example, John the Baptist had refuted that false promise when telling the Jews: "Therefore bring forth fruits worthy of repentance, and *do not begin to say to within yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'*" (Luke 3:8).

Paul also, having previously been a Pharisee, had also believed this falsehood and had been proud and confident of his own righteousness. He said, "As for the law, *a Pharisee* [the strictest sect]...as for the righteousness that is in the law [according to Rabbinic law], *blameless*. But whatever things were gain to me [as a Pharisee], I have counted them *loss* for Christ" (Phil. 3:5-7).

Like the Pharisee in Luke 18:11-12, Paul could have said: "God, I thank You that I am not like other men...I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all I possess." This is why Paul is so forceful in combating and condemning this false idea that created self-righteousness, or believing that one could earn salvation and demand it from God as a "payment" for keeping the entire law, including the regulations imposed by the Pharisees. That was a religious legalism that could produce spiritual pride--a nauseating self-righteousness before God.

Christ also announced that type of Pharisaic legalism. He said: "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence...Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men [with all the regulations and traditions of men], but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Mt. 23:24-28). Instead of being the Old Testament religion, the Jewish leaders had created a legalistic perversion of it and it was condemned by God.

"The popular idea," explains scholar Samuel Bacchiocchi, "that in the Old Testament people were saved, not by grace, but by observing the Law, ignores the fundamental biblical teaching that salvation has always been a divine gift of grace and not a human achievement. The law was given to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, not to enable them to gain acceptance with God and be saved, but to make it possible for them to respond to what God had already accomplished by delivering them from Egyptian bondage...This new view of the Law [started in the Intertestamental period] became characteristic of Rabbinic Judaism, which prevailed in Paul's time. The result was that the Old Testament view of the Law '*is characteristically and decisively altered and invalidated*'" (*The Sabbath Under Crossfire*, 1998, p. 187, 189).

Paul is focusing on the Jewish legalism and boasting that he himself had in believing they were justified by the merits of Abraham and by legalistically following the ceremonial law, symbolized by circumcision, which included submitting to all the ritual laws--purifications, sacrifices and traditions.

He states: "Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law" (Rom. 2:17-20). The rabbis were very proud of this legacy, but sadly, many were led to being self-righteous.

So, were they truly keeping God's law as they should? Paul, knowing them well, responds, "You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach [or apply it to] yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written" (Rom. 2:21-24).

He knew religious Jews thought they were very pious before the world, but deep inside, they were still *unconverted men*, full of hypocrisy, greed, and hatred. They still stole, killed, coveted, and lied, but

many did it in a secret and pious way. Christ said: "You devour widows' houses, and say long prayers to cover it up" (Mt. 23:14, ISV). They piously finagled them into signing their houses away.

Another case was the Jewish leaders who condemned Christ to death--all because of their wrong religious traditions. He said: "Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues...that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah...whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things [awful consequences] will come upon this generation" (Mt. 23:34-36). And it did in A.D. 70.

Paul denounces the Jewish hypocrisy which he had been a part and now considers that external religiosity and self-righteousness as "rubbish" (Phil. 3:8). He clarifies that one is a true "Jew" if he *keeps the law correctly, with faith and works*, but not as the Jewish legalists did. He says: "For circumcision is indeed *profitable if you keep the law* [in a legitimate and non-legalistic way]; but if you are a *breaker* of the law, your circumcision has *become uncircumcision*. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man *keeps the righteous requirements of the law*, will not his uncircumcision be counted as *circumcision*? (see Gal. 3:26-29). And will not the *physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law*, judge you who, even with your *written code* and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law [in its spiritual sense, as Christ pointed out to the Pharisees in Mt. 5]? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly [but the inner converted person], nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a [converted] Jew who is one *inwardly*; and circumcision is that *of the heart, in the Spirit* [or conversion], not in the [physical and external] letter; whose praise is not from men but from God" (Rom. 2:25-29).

Paul then makes it clear that although many of the Jews were not actually believers, this does not mean they lack advantages to be converted. Paul says: "What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed *the oracles of God*" (Rom. 3:1-2).

The "oracles of God" means the Old Testament. As *Nelson's Commentary* explains, "The oracles of God refer to the entire Old Testament--the laws and covenants--given by God to Israel. It reaffirms the apostles' belief of the inspiration of the Old Testament. The Bible is God's Word for us."

Paul goes on to clarify, "For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: 'That you may be justified in your words, and may overcome when you are judged.' But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) Certainly not! For then how will God *judge* the world?" (Rom. 3:3-6). Here he explains that God's plan of salvation still stands firm, despite Jewish unbelief. He says anyone who denies or doubts God as a righteous judge is a liar. He is still on His throne and is carrying out His loving plan of "bringing many children to glory" (Heb. 2:10).

He then refutes an accusation against him that says he is justifying sinning so grace abound. He says, "Since your lies bring great honor to God by showing how truthful He is, you may ask why God still says you are a sinner. You might as well say, 'Let's do something evil, so that something good will come of it!' Some people even claim that *we are saying this*. But *God is fair and we'll judge them as well* [for this lie]" (Rom. 3:7-8, CEV).

As *Believer's Commentary* points out, "Actually this last argument, stupid as it seems, is constantly leveled against the gospel of the grace of God. People say, 'If you could be saved just by faith in Christ, then you could go out and live in sin. Since God's grace super-abounds over man's sin, then the more you sin, the more His grace abounds.' (The apostle answers this objection in chapter 6.)."

Paul concludes: "What then? Are we [Jews] better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged *both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin*" (Rom. 3:9). This phrase "under sin" is a key concept to properly understand his use of the terms "under the law" used frequently in many of his epistles. It basically means "being under *the penalty and condemnation* of the law" by having sinned or broken God's law. It is crucial to grasp this concept when we study many of Paul's epistles and not get confused about it (2 P. 3:16).