

Total Wipeout

by Ray C. Stedman

It has been interesting to note, as we have gone through this letter to the Romans, how logically and powerfully the Apostle Paul develops his subject. He evidently possessed a very vivid imagination and used it skillfully and with great power to illustrate and illuminate what he wanted to say. I never fail to be delighted at how the mind of the Apostle Paul works as he sets this truth out for us.

The first twenty verses of Chapter 3 divide into two rather simple parts: The first eight verses are an imaginary dialogue that the apostle holds with the Jews. The second part, Verses 9-20, are his powerful description of the condition of mankind before God.

The first part, the dialogue with the Jews, grows out of the close of Romans 2, in which the apostle answers the question that is still being hotly debated in the State of Israel today: What constitutes a true Jew?

The State of Israel has never been able to settle that question. Is it religion? Is a Jew someone who believes the Torah, the Law, and the Prophets? Is it someone who is culturally a Jew, who keeps a kosher kitchen and observes all the dietary restrictions, who lives as a Jew and observes the traditions of Judaism? Many claim that this is the answer. Others say, “No, you can be an atheist and ignore all the ritual and ceremony of Judaism, but if you were born of Jewish ancestry you are a Jew.” Still others think it is the facial features that make a Jew – the hooked nose, brown eyes, olive skin. But there are millions of Jews without these physical characteristics. So the argument rages.

Paul answers that question in Chapter 2. He says a man is not a Jew who is one outwardly. In God’s sight, a Jew is one who has faith, who has the presence of the Spirit of God in his heart, who inwardly has faith in Jesus the Messiah. That is what constitutes a Jew and nothing else; all these other distinctions are laid aside. It is not the

knowledge or possession of the Law that makes a man a Jew; it is not the rite of circumcision; it is not the claim to a special relationship with God. The only thing that makes a man a Jew is faith in the Messiah.

At this point the vivid imagination of Paul comes into play. He imagines a Jewish objector standing up and arguing with him at this point. Perhaps this actually happened many times in the course of Paul’s travels throughout the Roman Empire. He had stated these things in many synagogues and surely at one time or another some knowledgeable Jewish rabbi would stand up and argue with him. That is what he is sharing with us now. In some ways this is a rather difficult passage. I invite you to pay close attention to it as we look through and see what these arguments are. Paul imagines three arguments from this Jewish objector.

In our own culture, you can place any religionist in place of the Jewish objector – a Mormon, a Christian Scientist, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Mohammedan, a Baptist, a Presbyterian, a Catholic. Anyone who counts on religion will offer the same kind of argument.

1. Paul imagines a Jew standing up at this point and saying, “Now, hold it! Wait a minute! These things you say don’t count are the very things God himself has given to us.” Circumcision came from God; God asked it of the Jews. And the Law was given by God to the Jews. It was God who called them his chosen people.

The argument is, “Paul, you’re setting aside what God has established. If these things don’t count, what advantage is there in being a Jew?” That question, and Paul’s answer, are phrased in the first two verses of Chapter 3.

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.

{Rom 3:1-2 NIV}

When Paul says *first*, he does not mean first in a long list of advantages, though he did see many advantages in being a Jew. What Paul means by *first* is “supremely, chiefly.” The great glory in being a Jew in Paul’s day was that the Jews had the Law. They possessed the written Word of God. That advantage is claimed today by many non-Jews, Catholics and Protestants who are proud of their knowledge of the Bible. Paul says that is a tremendous advantage. Already he has shown that everyone is under law. Even the savages in the jungle, who have no knowledge of the Bible or the Ten Commandments, still have the Law written in their hearts. Nobody is without a moral standard. The conscience lays hold of that law written in the heart to tell people whether they are doing right or wrong. So light is given to everyone. As John puts it in his Gospel, “There is a light that lights everyone coming into the world,” {cf, John 1:9 NIV}. Nobody lives in darkness.

But even though everyone has that light, the Jews had an additional degree of light. They were given the written Word on stone, so that it was permanently preserved. Thus they had a knowledge of the mind and will and character of God that other people did not possess. They had a greater opportunity to know and obey God than anyone else in that day. Therefore they had a tremendous advantage. Implied in this is the fact that, though the Jew had this tremendous advantage, he failed to make use of it, and therefore it did him no good at all. He was no better off than if he had never known the Law at all because he did not put it to its intended use.

This parallels the situation in our day. We have billions of people who have been raised in Sunday school and church, who know the Scripture, and have even read the Bible from cover to cover. We live in a land where Bibles are available by the dozens and we can take our choice of versions. The mind of God is

available, and yet millions of people are no better off than if they had never heard of the Bible. They are as lost as if they were savages in the jungles of Africa because the light they have is not put to use.

Just imagine, for instance, an island in darkness, populated with people. There is only one way to escape the island, a narrow bridge over a deep chasm, but the darkness is so great that only a few find their way over that bridge. Everybody on that island has been provided with a little penlight that enables them to dimly illuminate a small space around them, barely enough to avoid the more obvious obstacles in their path. But a certain group of people is given a powerful searchlight that can shine thousands of yards into the darkness. It is given to them not only so that they can find the bridge, but also so they can show others the way out. Yet these people, who have so much more light than the others, spend their time utilizing this powerful searchlight to look for needles in a haystack. They turn that searchlight on a mound of hay and search for needles. That, in essence, was what the Jews were doing.

The rabbis were arguing constantly over infinitesimal theological differences. Jesus called this “straining at a gnat, but swallowing a camel,” {cf, Matt 23:24}. They argued over how many steps constituted a violation of the Sabbath and whether spitting on a rock is permissible on the Sabbath, or whether spitting on mud is a violation. One would be right, and the other wrong. This is what they used the Law for. Though the Jews had a tremendous advantage in having the Law, Paul says, they failed to use it properly.

2. The imaginary rabbi comes back with a second objection and Paul responds in Verses 3-4:

What if some did not have faith? Would their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written:

“So that you may be proved right in your words and prevail in your judging.” {Rom 3:3-4 NIV}

The Jewish rabbi says, “Paul, are you suggesting that if some of the Jews did not believe (He is ready to admit that as a possibility.) that God could forget his promises to all the Jews? Are you saying that just because some of us didn’t measure up to what God required in the Law, everyone in Israel has lost the promise that God gave them? You seem to suggest that God is not interested in the very rituals which he himself instituted. Are you saying that circumcision and all these things mean nothing to God? Are you saying that God is upset by the disbelief of just a few Jews and so he has canceled all Israel’s prerogatives?”

Paul’s answer uses the strongest words in the Greek language to say a thing is false. “By no means! Not at all!” (Literally, “May it never be!” Or, as it is translated in some versions, “God forbid!”) That would suggest that God is the failure. It would suggest that God gave a promise and then did not keep his words, just because a few people failed to measure up. So God would be at fault. Our human hearts always tend to blame God for what goes wrong in our life, for our inability to fulfill what God demands. Paul says, “Never let that be! Let God be true, and every man a liar.” God is going to keep his word no matter how many fail.

Paul then quotes David’s fifty-first psalm, that wonderful psalm written after the twin sins of murder and adultery, in which he was caught red-handed. When David repented, he wrote this beautiful psalm, in which he confesses his sins to God,

**So that Thou mayest be in the right in
Thy words,
And blameless when Thou dost judge.
{cf, Psa 51:4b}**

For a year and a half, David tried to hide his sins and refused to admit them to God or anyone else. He went on acting as though he were righteous and let people think that he was still the godly king of Israel. He let that hypocrisy go on for eighteen months; then God sent Nathan the prophet, who speared him with his long, bony finger, and said, “Thou art the man!” {2 Sam 12:7 KJV}. David’s sins were exposed; he admitted them and confessed to

God. He said, “It isn’t you who are to blame, God; I did it.” Paul says, “Let God be true and every man a liar.”

Even if all the Jews fail in their belief, God will still fulfill his promise. How can God do this? God has said that some will believe. If everybody fails to believe, how can he keep his word? Paul says, “That’s your problem; it’s not God’s problem.” When certain of the Pharisees boasted to Jesus that they were “children of Abraham,” Jesus said, “Don’t you understand that God can raise up from these stones children unto Abraham?” {cf, Matt 3:9, Luke 3:8}. If men fail, God has unlimited resources to fulfill his promise. So there is no objection at that point. God will still judge the Jews, and all religionists, despite the failure of some.

3. A third objection is raised in Verse 5 and Paul responds in Verse 6. The Jew asks,

**But if our unrighteousness brings
out God’s righteousness more clearly,
what shall we say? That God is unjust
in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using
a human argument.) Certainly not!
If that were so, how could God judge
the world? {Rom 3:5-6 NIV}**

As Paul says, this is a common human argument. You still hear it today. People say, “If what we’re doing makes God look good because it gives him a chance to show his love and forgiveness, how can he condemn us? We’ve made him look good. We’ve given him a chance to reveal himself, and that’s what he wants. So he can’t condemn us for our sins. In fact (as Paul will go on to show the logical conclusion), let’s sin the more and make him look all the better!” People today say, “If God is glorified by human sin and failure, as the Scriptures say, then let’s sin all the more.”

Paul’s answer is, “Let’s carry that out to its logical conclusion. If everyone lived on that basis, then nobody could be judged and God would be removed as judge of all the world.” It would demean God. God would be no better than the worst of men. God himself could not act as a judge if he actually arranged things so that sin would glorify God. If God cannot judge, he is demeaned; if he does not judge, the

entire world is locked into perpetual evil. There would be no way of arresting the awful flow of human evil in this world. Therefore, this is a ridiculous argument.

The fact is, sin never glorifies God. Sin always has evil results; it does not produce good. As the Scriptures say, “He that sows to the flesh reaps corruption; he that sows to the Spirit reaps life everlasting,” {cf, Gal 6:8}. This is an ordained law of God which no one can break.

Paul strengthens this argument with a personal illustration in Verses 7-8:

Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” Why not say – as we are being slanderously reported and as some claim that we say – “Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is deserved.
{Rom 3:7-8 NIV}

The text adds the words, “Someone might argue,” and that does not belong here. If your text does not add this, it is more accurate.

Paul is saying that he includes himself in the circle of condemnation. He says, “If my falsehood...” If you look back in Romans you can see how he has narrowed this circle:

- In Chapter 1 he talks about what “they” do; “They are without excuse.”
- Chapter 2 comes down to “You O man, who judges another, you are without excuse.”
- Then in Chapter 3 it is “our unrighteousness,” and finally, “my falsehood.”

I love this because it means that Paul does not consider himself, even as a believer, beyond the judgment of God; he is just as capable of falsehood as anyone else. When that happens, that area of his life is subject to the condemnation of God, the same as anyone else. Paul does not hold himself up as better than anyone else.

Paul says, “Let’s go on to say the logical thing: Let’s do evil that good may come.” What a ridiculous argument, he concludes. Why, that removes

all differences between good and evil. This is what people are saying today. “There’s no such thing as good or evil. Whatever you like is good; whatever you don’t like, that’s evil. It’s only in your mind that there’s any difference between good and evil.” You see how up-to-date this argument is? Paul says it is ridiculous. The logical conclusion to that thinking is moral chaos and anarchy. Nobody could judge anything. We simply would plunge into a tremendous abyss of immorality in which anybody could do anything, and nobody would dare to raise a hand in opposition. This would produce moral anarchy. So, Paul says, the condemnation of this kind of reasoning is well-deserved.

In Verses 9 through 20, Paul introduces another question and answers it.

What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. {Rom 3:9 NIV}

I think it would be a little better to change this phrase from, “Are we any better?” to “Do we have any standing at all?” For that is what Paul is really saying. He has looked over all of mankind, and says, “Is there any ground by which a man or woman can please God apart from faith in Christ? Is there any way you can try to be good and make it?” His answer: None at all. No one can make it on those terms.

He has already demonstrated the universal condition of both Jews and Gentiles. He showed that the blatantly wicked people end up defying God, therefore they cannot make it. The morally self-righteous people, who pride themselves on their good conduct and clean living, simply delude themselves, so they cannot make it. The unenlightened pagans in all the jungles of the world, the concrete jungles as well as the green tropical jungles, defile their own consciences; they do not make it because they do not live up to their own standards. The religious zealots deny in deeds what they teach in words, and so they cannot make it. They are all wiped out.

Now comes the final touch. Paul gathers up what the Scriptures say on this subject. I like that. We are living in a day when what men say is really considered the final word. The Scriptures are considered, but are not really taken as authoritative.

But the apostles never treated Scripture that way. They listened to what men said, but when it came to the final authority, they said, “What Scripture says, that’s it!”

We need to return to that in our preaching. Every preacher ought to close his message by saying, in effect, what Walter Cronkite says at the end of every broadcast: “That’s the way it is, this Sunday, January 18, 1976.”

Paul gathers up a compilation of Scriptures from the Psalms and Proverbs and Isaiah to show that what he has described, God has already said. The Scriptures he uses divide into three very clear groups. First, there is the character of man, as God sees it; the conduct of man, in both speech and action; and the cause of all this.

**“There is no one righteous, not even one;”
{Rom 3:10b NIV}**

Isn’t that an amazing statement? Just think of all the nice people that you know. They may not be Christians, but they are nice people – good neighbors, kind and gracious people who speak lovingly. God, looking at them, says, “There’s not one among them that is righteous, not even one.” I think the total depravity of the human heart is revealed by the fact that when we read this kind of statement, “There is no one righteous, not even one,” we mentally add, “except me.” Right?

**“there is no one who understands,”
{Rom 3:11a NIV}**

Think of all the people today who are searching to understand the mystery of life. All over the world, in temples, schools, universities, in the jungles, before idols, people are searching to find the answer to the mystery of man: Why are we like we are? And in all that vast array of searchers, God says there is not one who understands, not one.

**“no one searches for God.” {Rom 3:11b
NIV}**

What a claim this is! Here are all these religious people going to temples, going through various procedures, observing rituals, flocking to churches, filling up worship areas all over the world. What are they looking for? We would say they are looking for God, but God does not say so. He says there is no one searching for God. They are look-

ing for *a god*, not *the God*. They are not looking for the God of truth and justice, who is behind all things.

**“All have turned away,
and together become worthless.
there is no one who does good,
not even one.” {Rom 3:12 NIV}**

That could hardly be made any clearer. There is no one who does good, not even one. Do you struggle with this? Then imagine that someone has invented a camera that records thoughts. Imagine that at a Sunday morning service, where all you fine-looking, moral, clean-living, decent people come, we would let you pass through a security section like they do at the airport and all your thoughts would be recorded. During the service, the camera is scanning, picking up your thoughts –

- What you thought when you sat down,
- What you thought when the person next to you sat down,
- What you were thinking when we sang the hymn, and
- What you were thinking when I led in prayer.

Then we announce that the next Sunday, instead of the regular service, we would hold a screening of the film from that camera. I wonder how many would show up?

But this is the stark revelation from Scripture of what God sees when he looks at the human race. There is no one who does good, not even one. Then he details why.

First, their speech:

**“Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit.
The poison of vipers is on their lips.
Their mouths are full of cursing and bit-
terness.” {Rom 3:13-14 NIV}**

This covers the whole realm of the speech. It begins deep down in the throat, it comes then to the tongue, then the lips, and then the whole mouth. It moves from the inward to the outward. What do you find? Deep down, Paul says, God sees an open grave with a stinking, rotten corpse and a horrible

stench coming up from it that reveals itself, ultimately, in vulgarity.

Do you ever wonder why children love toilet talk? Kids especially like to talk toilet talk. Why?

Why do adults like words with double meanings? You hear them on television all the time.

What is down in the heart comes out in the speech – not only vulgarity, but hypocrisy.

“Their tongues practice deceit.” Those little white lies, the way we erect facades, the way we claim to feel one way when we actually feel another; we think all this deceit is harmless and unnoticed. But God sees it.

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.” This is a picture of the tongue used to slander, to plant poison in another person’s heart – the put-down, the sharp, caustic words, the sarcasm that cuts someone off and depersonalizes another being. We are all guilty. This is what is inside, and this is what God sees with the realism of his eye.

“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” If you do not believe that, just step out on the street and hit the first fellow that comes by right on the mouth and see what comes out – cursing and bitterness! Cursing is blaming God; that is profanity. Bitterness is reproaching God because of the way he has run your life. This is what we hear all the time, even from Christians. We hear complaints about your circumstances, where God has placed you, and what he is doing with your life – cursing and bitterness.

Look now at the deeds that follow:

**“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
ruin and misery mark their paths,”**
{Rom 3:15-16 NIV}

Wherever man goes, ruin follows. Do we need any documentation of that today? Why do cities always develop ghettos and slums? Why do our beautiful mountains and streams become polluted? It is because of the heart of man.

**“ruin and misery mark their paths,
and the way of peace they do not know.”**
{Rom 3:16b-17 NIV}

I have often thought this would be an appropriate slogan for the United Nations! “The way of peace they do not know.” An intense and cruel war is being fought in Lebanon today and the United Nations is helpless to stop it because “the way of

peace they do not know.” The cause of this follows, in just one sentence:

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.” {Rom 3:18 NIV}

That brings us right back to Chapter 1, Verse 18 of Romans. “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness ... of men...” When men reject God, they lose everything. All these things follow because “there is no fear of God before their eyes.”

In the last two verses we have a clear vision of why God gave the Law. Since the Jews were so convinced that their possession of the Law gave them special privileges in God’s sight, Paul now turns to that subject.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law [That was a fantastic statement to make!]; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. {Rom 3:19-20 NIV}

When you read this terrible description of the human race as God sees it, it is almost impossible for us to believe that God is not going to say, “Enough! Wipe them out!” If all he sees is wretchedness, misery, evil, deceit, hypocrisy, vulgarity, profanity, slander, and all these evil things that are in every heart – every one without exception – our natural instinct is to say, “Then God doesn’t want us.” But the amazing thing is that across this kind of verse he writes, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,” {John 3:16a KJV}. God did not send the Law to destroy us (and this is very important); he sent the Law to keep us from false hope.

The worst thing that can happen is to be going down a road to an important destination and think you are on the right track and spend all the time necessary to get there only to discover that the road peters out into nothingness. You find you have been on the wrong track and it is too late to go back. That was what was happening. So God, in his loving kindness, has given us the Law to keep us from taking a false path. Though the Law con-

demns us, it is that very condemnation that makes us willing to listen, so that we find the right path.

Paul says the Law does three things to us:

1. First, it stops our mouth: We have nothing to say. You can always tell someone is close to becoming a Christian when they shut up and stop arguing back. Self-righteous people are always saying, “But – but this – but I – yes, but I do this – and I do that.” They are always arguing. But when they see the true meaning of the Law, their mouth is shut. When you read a statement like this, there is really nothing left to say, is there?

I had a friend who told me she was given a traffic ticket one day. She was guilty of doing what she was charged with, but she felt there was some justification for it, so she thought she would go to court and argue it before the judge. She imagined in her mind how she would come in and the judge would ask her if she was guilty. She would say, “Yes, but I want to explain why.” She would proceed to convince the judge and all the court that what she did could hardly be avoided and that she was justified in doing it. Her argument was ready. “But,” she said, “when I came into that court and stood up there all alone, and the judge was there on the bench, dressed in his robe, and he looked over his glasses at me and said, ‘Guilty or not guilty?’ all my arguments faded. I just said, ‘Guilty.’” Her mouth was stopped.

That is the first thing the Law does: it shuts you up, and you do not argue with God anymore.

2. Second, Paul says, “The whole world is held accountable to God.” That makes us realize there is no easy way, no way by which death suddenly is going to dissolve all things into everlasting darkness, forever forgotten. The whole world has to stand before God. Hebrews

puts it so starkly, “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment,” {Heb 9:27 KJV}.

3. Finally, the Law reveals very clearly what sin is. What does the Law want of us? Jesus said that all the Law is summed up in one word: Love. All the Law asks us to do is to act in love. All these things the Law states are simply loving ways of acting. When we face ourselves before the Law, we have to confess that many, many times we fail in love. We do not love. That is what the Law wants us to see, because, then, when all else fails, we are ready to listen to what follows.

Look at Verse 21 and the next two words: “But now” a righteousness from God has been provided. That is what Paul wants us to hear. When we take that one way, we find we have learned to love – not by the Law, but by the provision of the Son of God.

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for loving us enough to tell us the truth. Thank you for loving us enough to shut up all other ways – to block them out and tell us they are wrong and they do not lead anywhere – so that we give up trying to make ourselves good enough to belong to you. Help us to take the only way that has ever been provided, a righteousness that is given to us, which we never earned, and cannot earn, but which is ours because we believe the Lord Jesus. We thank you for that. How rich we are because of it. May anyone here without this now turn and open his life to you, knowing that this is the only way out of the judgment of God. We thank you in Jesus’ name, Amen.