

THE DOCTOR IS OUT

The unbeatable foe

“Death is the only thing I’m afraid of,” said Al Davis, the aging managing general partner of the Oakland Raiders. “It’s the only thing you can’t control. The football I’ll get straight. My biggest thing now is this death business. I’ve always been able to control the elements of my life, dominate my environment without hurting others. But this death business ... I can’t beat it. I can’t win.”¹

There you have it: death, the insurmountable human problem. We can deny sin all we want, even remove it from our vocabulary. We can eliminate guilt as a concept. But we can’t deny death. The scriptures tell us that death is an invader, and that it’s here for only one reason: sin. Rebellion against God, of which all are guilty, leads to death. You can’t beat death.

What does God have to say about it? He partnered with a particular people, the Jews, in order to rescue the world from sin and death. Israel, if you will, was the doctor, sent by God to cure the disease. But the doctor also contracted the disease and turned out not to be the solution but part of the problem, which creates quite a problem for God.

Humanity, quite frankly, is desperate.

Paul told the sad story of the Gentiles in Romans 1:18-32. The Jewish story was in the shadows, forming the subplot. As Paul turns the page, the sad story of the Jews emerges in Romans 2:1-3:20. If Romans 1:18-32 featured the story of Gentile sin, Romans 2 features the failure of the Jews to rescue the Gentiles from sin.

Romans 2:

¹Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. ²And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. ³But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? ⁵But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, ⁶who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: ⁷to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; ⁸but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

¹¹For there is no partiality with God. ¹²For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; ¹³for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. ¹⁴For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively

the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves,¹⁵ in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them,¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

¹⁷But if you bear the name “Jew” and rely upon the Law and boast in God,¹⁸ and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law,¹⁹ and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,²⁰ a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,²¹ you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal?²² You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?²³ You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?²⁴ For “THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,” just as it is written.

²⁵For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.²⁶ So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?²⁷ And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.²⁹ But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

The hidden target

Paul in Romans 2 draws implications from Romans 1:18-21, in which he declared that all humans have received revelation from God and are “without excuse” for their rejection of him. After focusing on Gentile culpability in Romans 1:18-32, in Romans 2:1-3:20 he spotlights the Jews, who also “have no excuse.”

The person whom Paul addresses in verse 1 is anyone who is guilty of hypocrisy. His description of such a person resonates with what was known of pagan philosophers who espoused a certain morality but failed to live up to it. They would practice at least some of the “same things” Paul condemned in Romans 1:29-32, even though they too condemned them. Such people, who suppose themselves superior, are without excuse before God and are subject to his judgment.

However, a pagan Gentile, even if he were morally inclined, would not “suppose” that he would have anything to do with Paul’s Jewish God. Paul’s hidden target, the Jews, begins to emerge in verse 3. Jewish hypocrites would be inclined to suppose that they would escape the judgment of their God.

The hypocrites who Paul has in mind misinterpret their experience of God. If God lets them do what they want, without judging them in a way that stops them, it’s because God is kind, not because he endorses their stance. He also is tolerant and patient, which means he himself suffers pain as he waits on people. God holds back from giving them what they deserve in order that they will comprehend his kindness and change the way they think and act. But if they continue to resist his kindness, all they are doing is postponing—and preparing themselves for—the judgment they think they are escaping.

The impartiality of God

Final judgment will be based on one's deeds, according to the texts that Paul quotes, Psalm 62:12 and Proverbs 24:12. Both Psalm 62 and Proverbs 24 warn against pride. The way men and women live their lives will show what they have valued. Those whose perseverance in doing well demonstrates that they value a future with God will be rewarded with what they were seeking: life with God in the coming age. Those whose disobedience to God demonstrates their selfish ambition—their pride—will face his wrath.

In the end, it doesn't matter whether one is a Jew or Gentile. What matters is how one has lived one's life. In that the Jews are Paul's emerging target, this means that they have no advantage before God in the final judgment. Judgment based on deeds, instead of Jewish privilege, makes the case for the impartiality of God.

God will not condemn Gentiles based on the Jewish law, which they have not received. If he condemns them, he will do so based on their sins that disregard the revelation they have received, inasmuch as he has revealed himself to all people (Romans 1:19-20, 32). On the other hand, if he condemns Jews, he will use the law that he gave them to do so.

Jews will not be judged favorably just because they have heard the law. No, only the “doers of the law” will be “justified”—meaning, God will rule in their favor, confirming them as his people.

Paul illustrates this point by writing of certain people who are, literally, Gentiles “by nature.” He's not speaking of Gentiles who “do instinctively the things of the law.” The word that is translated “instinctively” is also used in verse 27 to describe Gentiles, not what Gentiles do. In verse 27, one is not “instinctively” uncircumcised; one is “by nature,” or “by birth,” uncircumcised. These particular Gentiles, though they haven't received the Jewish law, in some sense do it. Their doing of the law demonstrates that God has written the work of the law in their hearts. In other words, they are part of the new covenant people of God (Jeremiah 31:33).²

Their consciences and thoughts have been positively affected by the internalization of the law so that they are discerning in matters of good and evil. The last phrase in verse 15 literally reads “accusing or else defending,” without reference to who or what is being accused or defended. Paul appears, simply, to be describing the spiritually sensitive thinking of people who care about justice. In the final judgment, when God judges even people's secrets, these Gentiles will receive a favorable ruling.

The gospel, or good news, calls for judgment, which will be exercised through Christ Jesus. The gospel is the announcement that Jesus, the Jewish king, is Lord of the whole world. The final implication of the announcement is the expectation that God's king will judge the world in order to make things right (Psalms 2, 72; Isaiah 11:1-10). God will right all wrongs. And if Christ is doing the judging, this is especially good news for those whose justification in the present, through faith in Christ, anticipates the final verdict, when they will be justified by their works, when it will be shown that they fulfilled the law through Christ and the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:1-2).

The problem with the Jews

Paul brings the Jews sharply into focus in verse 17. His description of a hypocrite in verses 1-4 resonates with his description of a specifically Jewish hypocrite. High-minded Jews are no better than high-minded Gentiles.

They rely on the law, but it only gives them a false sense of security, in that they transgress it. They boast in God, that they are his people, but their actions invalidate their claims. They know the law and therefore deem themselves able to teach others, but they themselves are not living up to what the law commands. They skirt the law in ways that enable them to steal, commit adultery and rob pagan temples. Like the pagans of Romans 1:18-20, they reject the revelation they've been given in self-deceiving ways so that they are unaware of what they're doing. If the pagans are guilty of idolatry, sexual misconduct and antisocial behavior in Romans 1:18-32, so are the Jews.

They boast not only in God but also in God's law. In their eyes, their possession of the law makes them God's people. But their transgression of the law dishonors God, just as men and women dishonor the bodies that God gave them when they misuse them in same-sex pursuits (Romans 1:24-27). The hypocritical Jew is no better than the homosexual pagan. He dishonors God and shows that he does not value the "honor" connected with true humanity and a future with God (verse 7).

The real problem with the Jews in Romans 2, however, is not that they are sinners just like the Gentiles, but that "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of them." They thought of the Gentiles in terms described in verses 19-20: blind, living in darkness, foolish and immature. The purpose of God's covenants with Abraham and Israel was to address the sin of the world (Genesis 12:3, Exodus 19:5-6). The Lord called Israel, his servant, to be a light to the nations so that his salvation would reach to the end of the earth (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). But the light became part of the darkness. The solution to the problem became part of the problem. Therefore, the Gentiles, not seeing the light, blaspheme, or slander, the name of God.

In quoting from Isaiah 52:5, with echoes from Ezekiel 36:20, Paul evokes the time in the 6th Century B.C. when the Jews were in exile, held captive by the Babylonians, who mocked the Lord. The Lord had raised up the Babylonians and sent Israel into exile because of its persistent idolatry. Paul is saying that the Jews still have given the Gentiles no reason to worship the Lord.

The true Jew

The circumcision of Jewish males, in accordance with the law, was a sign of God's covenant with Israel. It marked Jews out as God's people, as those who kept his law. But circumcision gives no one an advantage before God if one breaks the law. In such a case, the mark of inclusion becomes a mark of exclusion. On the other hand, if one keeps the law and fulfills the law, even if he's an uncircumcised Gentile, God will recognize him as a covenant member.

As the people of God, Jews expected to have a role in judging the Gentiles. But if Jews break the law and Gentiles keep the law, the tables will be turned.

What legitimately identifies one as a Jew is an invisible circumcision that is "of the heart, by the Spirit." The Lord wanted the Jews to circumcise not just their flesh but also their hearts and respond to him (Deuteronomy 10:16). But if Israel broke the covenant by persisting in idolatry, the Lord would remove Israel from the Promised Land. However, the Lord also anticipated bringing Israel back to the land (Deuteronomy 29:22-

28; 30:1-5). Deuteronomy 30:6: “Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.”

Anticipating a new covenant on the eve of the exile, the Lord said, “I will put my law within them, and on their heart I will write it” (Jeremiah 31:33). During the exile he told Israel, “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will be careful to observe my ordinances” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

The new sign of inclusion is neither possession of the law nor the circumcision of the law but the presence of the Holy Spirit. God has created his new covenant people, and Gentiles who believe the gospel and possess the Spirit are members, while Jews who reject the gospel and do not have the Spirit are not. Paul contrasts the false boast of Jews who transgress the law with the praise from God that comes to new covenant believers who fulfill the law.

Paul shows Jews who trust in the law and circumcision that prophecies concerning the new covenant are being fulfilled in other people. He thereby illustrates the failure of Israel to address the sin of the world.

Paul does not say here how the spiritually circumcised Gentiles fulfill the law. He will have more to say about that later (Romans 8:1-4, 13:8-10). But in Romans 2, he would seem to have in mind the law’s function to attract the world (Deuteronomy 4:5-8, Micah 4:2). If the law is only possessed, and not obeyed, it provides no light. God’s name is thereby blasphemed among the Gentiles, but the Lord in both Isaiah and Ezekiel promised to act on behalf of his name by making a new covenant (Isaiah 52:7-55:13, Ezekiel 36:22-37:28). The Holy Spirit, replacing the law, circumcises hearts and beckons the world. God’s purposes for the law, to reach the world, are being fulfilled in his new covenant people. Jesus told his followers, “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).

Disconnected from the story

If Romans 2 is about the Jews’ failure to be God’s answer to the problem of sin, one might well ask how it relates to the church today. It does, in fact, relate in several ways.

In order to apply it accurately to our day, however, we must realize that this is not simply ancient history that is of no interest to us. One of the tragedies of postmodern life is that people feel disconnected not only from each other but also from any meaningful purpose. They desperately gather in tribes, but the tribes offer no meaningful purpose other than being together, deflecting pain and surviving.

In order to know who you are and what you’re doing, you have to know where you’ve been and where you’re going. The scriptures give us this story. The Jewish story is an earlier chapter of the story of the people of God. The chapter that we find ourselves in is part of the same story. If you tear out earlier pages of the book, your chapter makes no sense, or the sense that you make of it is little more than guesswork.

Common misinterpretations of the New Testament are based on ignorance of Israel’s place in the story. We therefore endeavor, at Peninsula Bible Church, to study,

preach and teach from the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament. In coming to the scriptures, we remind ourselves of the story and go deeper into it.

Broken problem solvers

The failure of the Jews as a people to rescue the world bodes ill for any humanly concocted scheme, either nationally or individually conceived, to solve the world's problems.

As Americans, emboldened by technological, military and economic achievements, we think of ourselves as problem solvers. We think we can fix ourselves. For evidence of this, go to the self-help section in your local bookstore and note the staggering number of volumes. The fact that it takes an entire wing of a bookstore to display the volumes should tell us something about our impotence to fix what's wrong with us.

We also think we can fix the world's problems. If the Jews failed, with all of their advantages, most notably the presence of God and the possession of his law, so will everyone else. Marxism didn't do it. Capitalism won't do it. Globalization won't do it. Humans will never be able to solve the problem of death, because they will never be able to solve the problem of sin, which causes death.

The depth of the problems, and the failure of Israel and all other solutions to the problems, conveys to us our desperate plight. We need a solution that is not of our own making. We need something that comes not from ourselves but from God.

We need a story other than the story of Israel's failure. But we need a story that is connected to the story of Israel but also goes beyond it, because God promised to rescue the world through Israel, and God is faithful. Isaiah and Ezekiel reported that God's people slandered his name, but they also promised that God would act on behalf of his name.

We need the gospel, the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah who took upon himself the vocation of Israel, moved the story of Israel forward and brought it to its climax in his death for the sins of the world and in his resurrection from the dead.

The light of the world

God's purpose for Israel, to rescue the world from sin and death, is now being fulfilled by the church, composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers in the gospel. In that God's final vindication of us has been anticipated in his justification of us, we are charged with bringing God's justice to bear in the present. The Holy Spirit has circumcised our hearts so that we are enabled to care for matters of good and evil. We embody the outrageous love of God.

We are God's counter-cultural community, the living, breathing light of the world. God has sent his Son and his Spirit to do for the church what the law couldn't do for Israel: beckon the world to join the story of the people of God and to find a past, a present and a future. When the final age dawns, it will be evident that our Spirit-empowered labor was not in vain, that we made a contribution (1 Corinthians 15:58).

New York Times columnist David Brooks saw the light of the world from a church in Mozambique during a trip to Africa last year. The structure of the church was only 10 yards long, with a tin roof and walls made of sticks. He was more impressed with

the church's approach to the problem of AIDS than that of any government. He observed women gathering to sing and pray and look after orphans of AIDS victims. They talked about praying for a man who was beating his HIV-positive wife and trying to bring him into the congregation. He heard them analyze the problems of their land in a way that offered God's will to people without being condemning. Here's what Brooks wrote:

"This week in Africa, I've been impressed by the level of medical expertise and depressed by the lack of moral, sociological, psychological and cultural expertise. The most subtle analysis of human nature I heard came in that church made of sticks."³

There's a church that's lighting up not only its corner of Africa but an American journalist as well.

We cannot leave Romans 2 without asking ourselves whether we are, in fact, fulfilling God's purpose as the light of the world. Or are we, like the Jews who Paul brought to the judgment bar, hypocrites? We who teach others, are we not teaching ourselves? Do we assume a holier-than-thou posture but turn a blind eye to our own failings? Are we quick to find fault with others because it reassures us of our supposedly superior status? Do we assume that all is well with God because he doesn't seem to be bothering us when in reality he's being patient? Do we misinterpret his kindness?

Is God's name being slandered because of us? Are we, by the way we live as individuals, as families and together as the church, giving the world no good reason to believe the gospel?

How do we address these questions? We invite the Holy Spirit to search our hearts. And if it comes to our attention that we have presumed upon the kindness of God and misinterpreted his tolerance and patience as his endorsement, then we will have eyes to see him in a new light. We will see that God has been waiting for us. When we see God as our suffering, lovesick Father, bent over in pain, then the Holy Spirit has done his work.

False sense of security

We must also acknowledge that not everyone who says to Jesus, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21). There will be those today, like some Jews in Paul's day, who believe they are right with God but actually are in great peril. They have a false sense of security. They rely on Bible possession, baptism, family or tribe of origin, church attendance, or adherence to some kind of personal or cultural code. None of these necessarily indicates covenant membership.

The signs of covenant membership in the book of Romans are the presence of the Holy Spirit and the presence of faith. Those who belong to God have had their hearts circumcised by the Holy Spirit, who has written the law on their hearts. The Spirit testifies to them that they are children of God (Romans 8:16).

They value a future with God and therefore "persevere in doing good," as empowered by the Spirit. In other words, they love, which means they fulfill the law (Romans 13:10). Such perseverance offers assurance, provided that it's connected to the Spirit and one's hope for a future with God. The doing of good that counts is the doing of the law that has been written on one's heart by the Holy Spirit.

There may be some who need to ask, based on Paul's words in Romans, whether they do in fact belong to God. Some may need to forsake pride and truly turn to God for the first time.

We're desperate

All human solutions are destined for dust, to which all humans will return. We're desperate. We need the gospel. All of us: Jews, Gentiles, hypocritical believers, hypocritical unbelievers.

You can't beat death. You can't win. Or can you?

Scott Grant / 1-29-06

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¹ Quote appeared in *San Jose Mercury News*, July 4, 1995. P. 1A.

² When Paul uses similar language in verse 29, he's clearly referring to new covenant believers. God promised in the new covenant, "I will put my law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). It would seem that in verse 14 Paul is not referring to all Gentiles who have received from God some kind of moral law independent of the Jewish law. Unlike the people of verse 5, their "hearts" are repentant, in that God has written the law in their hearts and circumcised their hearts (verse 29). In a different vein, Paul has already said that Gentiles, apart from the Jewish law, know something of God and even know "the ordinance of God" that those who practice anti-social behavior are worthy of death (Romans 1:18-20, 32).

³ David Brooks, "Change In Behavior Will Help Stop AIDS." Appeared in *Palo Alto Daily News*, June 12, 2005. P. 13.