

What do we do, how do we react, when we are accused of something? What do we do when judgments are made against us? And I'm thinking specifically of things that are legitimate, things that are justified and that we KNOW we're guilty of. How do we act? Well, if you're anything like me, your natural tendency is to bow up. You get defensive. I had it happen this week. Someone shared a second-hand criticism, which probably had a degree of truth to it, and I immediately got defensive. We make excuses. We blame others. We deny wrongdoing. We minimize the seriousness of the offense. All of these things.

In the third chapter of his letter to the church at Rome – the NT book of the Bible we know as Romans – the Apostle Paul has devoted a chapter and a half to making accusations against the whole of humanity. Real, true,

legitimate accusations. He has worked to establish in the hearts and minds of his readers mankind's guilt before a righteous and holy God. Beginning in 1:18 he talks about the sin of the whole world and how God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. He goes on to explain that, because God made Himself known through creation and man rejected Him – trading the truth for a lie and exchanging the glory of God for idols – God handed man over to the control and consequences of his own sinful desires. Then, in 2:1 Paul turns his attention to the religious people, specifically religious Jews. He says to them that they are JUST as guilty for judging others for breaking laws they don't keep themselves and for presuming on God's kindness simply based on their religious pedigree. He goes on to highlight two specific areas in which they set their confidence and

their boasting: their possession of God's law and their observance of circumcision as a religious rite. And Paul says clearly that neither one of these, on its own, is able to protect a person from God's wrath on the day of judgment.

So imagine you're that person, the kind of person Paul is writing to. Imagine you assumed that you were good, that you were safe, that because of your religious heritage that you had nothing to fear. And now, here comes Paul taking your confidence and smashing it to pieces, knocking your stability out from under you. How would you feel? What would you do? Well, you'd **probably get defensive**. You'd probably try to argue. Paul, being Jewish himself and having been a religious Jew – a Pharisee, and expert in the law – anticipates this kind of response. And so, to make his point and advance his argument that even the

most religious, most observant, most pedigreed Israelite stands justly accused and guilty before a holy God, he engages in this hypothetical dialogue with a random, fictional, representative Jewish objector. Some have even suggested that Paul the Christian may have been arguing with Paul the Jew, using the arguments Paul himself would have made before becoming a Christian. But I would invite you to go ahead and take a Bible and turn with me to Romans 3 and follow along as I read vv.1-8. And as I read, I want you to listen for the defensive arguments that Paul raises and how he answers them. It's a series of questions and answers, if that might help. Listen for the question Paul raises, and then his answer. So let's go ahead and read together Romans 3:1-8 [READ].

Now I don't always do this, but I want to walk you through the argument here piece by piece, verse by verse, like Paul walks his original audience through it. Like I mentioned, it's a series of questions and answers. But it gets a little complex and complicated and even confusing. In fact, I'll admit to you that I wrestled with it all week long. Even yesterday I was texting poor Caleb asking him, "Does this make sense? What do you think about this?" And he was kind enough to think and talk through those things with me. But as confusing as it might seem at first, I hope to be able to make sense of it and see what it says to and for us.

With each verse either being a question or the corresponding answer, Paul begins, of course, **with a question**. And it's basically, "What saving advantage is

there in being a Jew?" If God chose the people of Israel out of all the peoples and nations on the earth to be His special people, and if He gave them alone His law and the observance of circumcision as signs that He would be their God and they alone would be His people, completely unique and set apart, and yet they find themselves in the same spot as everyone else on judgment day, under the wrath of God, and if any random Gentile without possessing the law and without the physical observance of circumcision could be saved and experience a real covenant relationship with God through faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, apart from those outward requirements, what was it all for? The law? Circumcision? The OT? The promises? The exodus? The Promised Land? Were all those things just meaningless? Was the OT a lie? Or did God not keep His word? Weren't all those

special events and possessions supposed to give the Jews some degree of confidence? If what Paul seems to be saying is true, does being Jewish make any difference at all when it comes to a saving relationship with God?

You hear what's happening here, right? Paul suggests that religious Jews might call into question the truthfulness and reliability of the OT. Was it all just a compelling story, or did those elements mean something for those people and their descendants? But more importantly, he's suggesting that this line of questioning casts doubt on the faithfulness and credibility of God Himself. If what Paul insinuates in chapter 2 is true, did God get it wrong or did He back out of His promise? Instead of reflecting on and acknowledging the reality of their own sin and guilt and their own need for repentance and true faith, they deflect and accuse God. We're not going to talk about our sin and

unrighteousness; we're going to turn the tables and point the finger at God.

So how does **Paul answer**? What saving advantage us there to being a Jew? Any at all? Paul says, "YES! There is a significant advantage!" Much in every way! The law and circumcision are valuable advantages to the Jew. Paul hasn't been trying to say the Jew has no privilege; just that those privileges don't offer any advantages by themselves at the judgment. But truly, the Jews had a considerable advantage. First and foremost (and interestingly, Paul never gets past point one), the nation of Israel was entrusted with the oracles of God, God's revelation of Himself, who He is and how He works. Paul is probably referring here to the entire OT with specific attention to the promises of redemption, God's promises to save. This



word, this truth, these promises have been committed to the people of Israel, the Jews. That, in itself, is an advantage. The problem is, they seem to have missed two critical realities.

First, this special relationship God initiated with them through their ancestor Abraham was intended for the benefit of others. Remember back in 2:18-20 when Paul said [READ]? That's exactly what they were supposed to be to the world: guides to the blind, lights to those in darkness, instructors to the foolish, teachers of children.

Back in Genesis 12 when God came to Abraham, He promised to bless him and make his name great so that he would BE a blessing. Then God promises that through Abraham and his descendants all the families of the earth would be blessed. In Genesis 15 God ratifies that

covenant and pledges Himself to keep it unconditionally. In Genesis 17 God gives Abraham a physical sign for all his descendants to show that they were recipients of this promise: the observance of circumcision. Then, in Exodus 19, God makes a covenant with all those descendants at Mt. Sinai by giving them His law to live by. But even the law was not given just for their benefit. God says that, in giving them the law, He was making them a kingdom of priests to mediate God's blessing to the whole world. So they are given these words, these observances, these oracles to hold in trust for the blessing of others. They are to attest and declare these truths to the world! In the same way, we have been entrusted with the mystery of the gospel. He has deposited that message with us, the church. We have been entrusted with the message of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. But He has not given

it to us solely for our benefit, but for the purpose of taking it to the world so they might receive the blessing of it. But they had missed that.

The second reality they missed was that this special relationship with God was to set them apart as a holy nation through which the Redeemer would come, the one promised in Genesis 3 who would crush the head of the serpent, the one who would bring blessing to all the families of the earth, the one who would sit on David's throne and rule over an everlasting kingdom. Jesus came as a Jew, to the Jews, that through the Jews salvation might come to the world. All the gospel events took place in the midst of the people of Israel. THAT is the advantage they either missed or willfully rejected. Instead of seeing themselves as the people through whom the Messiah

would come to bring hope to the world, they saw their special relationship as an excuse for complacency and self-satisfaction. I'm afraid that too often Christians do that. We presume that God's grace to us exempts us from any concern over our sin or the lostness of the world.

Don't let God's kindness and mercy shown to you cause you to be dismissive of your ongoing, indwelling sin. Don't take His amazing grace and turn it into a cheap grace that only serves to get you off the hook. His grace is a transforming grace meant to empower you to put your sin to death, pursue holiness, and take the message of hope to the world. So that's the first question and the first answer.

The second question (or pair of questions) is in v.3. **And it's this:** If some, even the majority, of Jews were

unfaithful, does that nullify God's promises? Looking back at the history of Israel, it is a sad reality that most of the Jews were unfaithful to the covenant. And even now, when Paul is writing, most had not placed their trust in Christ as the Messiah. They possessed the law, and they practiced circumcision, but they did not KEEP the law or have circumcised hearts. Paul's first assumption is correct: some/most Jews were unfaithful. The question is, if that's the case, if God doesn't go ahead and save them, if He doesn't go ahead and bless them, does that make Him unfaithful to His covenant promises to Israel? You see, God had ENTRUSTED His oracles to Israel; but they had not TRUSTED Him. Paul is painting a contrast between God's faithFULness and Israel's faithLESSness. God's commitment to His covenant and Israel's failure to live up to the covenant. So the question is, does the failure of

God's people change or eliminate God's promises to them and His intentions for them? Does the sin of His people force God to forsake His original plan and go to a backup?

And what **is the answer**? No way! By no means! God forbid! God absolutely remains true to His promises. The problem is that Israel had failed to fully understand what it means for God to be faithful to His covenant. They assumed that God's covenant promise are ONLY promises to bless. And certainly, God's promise is to save and bless all those who believe and who obey and who are faithful. But the covenant also contains God's promise to faithfully, righteously judge those who aren't, who don't. God will uphold His righteousness and justice through saving AND through judging. That's the message of the gospel as well. We refer to the gospel as "good news"

because that's the literal translation, but the truth is, it's only good news for those who believe it. For those who do not, it is terrible news. Paul goes on to say here that even if EVERYONE abandons the truth for a lie, even if EVERY SINGLE PERSON is judged unrighteous and subjected to God's wrath, God is STILL reliable, STILL just, STILL true to act according to His word and His promise. Which is something I think we need to be reminded of. Nothing God does is unjust. Nothing God does is unrighteous. Nothing God does is unfaithful. God keeps all His promises and fulfills all His word and upholds all His justice, whether in saving or in judging. We get things wrong. We misinterpret. We misjudge. We misunderstand. God never does.

Paul quotes from Psalm 51 here in v.4, which, if you're not familiar, is the Psalm King David wrote after he used his royal power to force his friend's wife into his bed, then tried to lie to cover his sin, then, when he couldn't, had his friend killed. David was confronted, his sin was exposed, and he confessed and wrote this Psalm. In v.4 he declares that God is right and just to pronounce guilt and judgment over David. Paul uses the same passage to declare God right and just to pronounce guilt over all sinners, Jew or Gentile. He's reminding us that God's faithfulness is not ultimately to His people, but to Himself and His word. He is equally faithful to bless faith and to judge sin. Which is another good reminder for us that God's ultimate concern is not for our blessing, but for His glory. And so we should not presume that because we possess a certain label or social status, that we are immune from judgment. "God



would never do that!” He can. And He will. And He is just and right to do it.

The third and fourth questions are closely related and reflect a shift in Paul’s argument. The first two questions dealt specifically with God’s covenant obligations to Israel. What did His promises mean for them, and would He be unfaithful to judge the unfaithful? His **third question** is different. He asks, “If Israel’s unrighteousness highlights God’s righteousness, is God then unrighteous to judge them?” He starts with some assumptions. First, God’s righteousness is a good thing, right? Yes. It is good to draw attention to that, right? Yes. When we are unrighteous, it serves as a dark backdrop against which His righteousness is magnified, right? Yes. So if our sin allows God to showcase His character so that He might be

seen and worshiped for who He is, wouldn't it be wrong of Him to judge us? I mean, you don't punish someone for doing something good, do you? Our sin is merely enhancing God's reputation! That is some twisted, perverse logic. Essentially it's a rationalization of sin.

Here's why my sin isn't really so bad and doesn't deserve God's wrath: it makes God look good. And for the record, Paul wants to make it clear that he is NOT accusing God of unrighteousness, which is why he says he's speaking humanly.

So what **is the answer**? Is God unrighteous to judge unrighteousness? Again, no way! By no means! God forbid! For God to inflict His wrath on His people for their sin is in no way unjust. That's absurd! It's impossible! It's a heartbreaking example of the lengths to which we will go

to justify our own sin, the lengths to which we will go to refuse to acknowledge our guilt. The truth is, if God were NOT to pour out His wrath on sin, THAT would make Him unjust! THAT would make Him unrighteous! If that's the case, how would He be expected to judge the world in the end, judge the Gentiles (which, by the way, the Jews were totally on board with!)? Paul keeps driving home that point he made back in 2:11, "God shows no partiality." He will judge all people, Jew and Gentile, by the same standard. And by the same standard ALL people, left to themselves, are guilty and deserving of His wrath.

The **last question** is pretty similar. If Israel's lie highlights God's truth, why does God judge Israel? It's essentially the same question restated. If my lie shines a spotlight on God's truth (which is a good thing), why am I judged for

my sin? Why should I be treated like other sinners when my sin gives opportunity for God's goodness and brings abundant glory to Him?

This time, though, **the answer** is a little different. This time, Paul basically says, "Yeah, I get that a lot, but it's ridiculous and blasphemous and not even worth debating." He affirms that this accusation – you teach that we should sin more to glorify God's righteousness – is frequently made against him as a logical conclusion of his view. But he says those accusations are insulting and blasphemous. And so he doesn't even answer the question. We might assume he answers it in Romans 6:1, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!" But there he's talking about Christians in light of God's saving grace. Here, it's an unbelieving Jew cynically questioning how

God can judge his sin if even sin brings God glory. Paul dismisses that argument as ridiculous. God is absolutely just to judge the sinner whose lie brings God glory because God is glorified by upholding His righteousness in judging sin! This entire passage is magnifying the depth of human sin and depravity and our need for the gospel. And it shows how difficult it is to convince us of that! We don't want to admit it. And so Paul sets out to eliminate every excuse and kick out every prop of self-righteousness we use to hold ourselves up before God. But best of all, all of this clarifies, not only the lengths to which we will go to justify ourselves, but the lengths to which God HAD to go to save stubborn, unwilling, proud, defensive sinners. It required the sinless life, the atoning death, and the triumphant resurrection of Jesus. And while Paul doesn't quite get to that point in this passage, I want you to

understand that this morning. This picture Paul paints of the pervasive depravity of mankind can only be overcome by the magnificent grace of God in Christ.

So Paul's message here in Romans 3:1-8 is that God is faithful to all His promises, specifically His promises to Israel. His righteousness is steady and dependable. But His faithfulness is ultimately not to Israel, but to His own person and promises. Therefore, God is righteous when He punishes His people for their sin AND when He rewards them for their obedience. But that does NOT mean we should excuse sin simply because it magnifies God's righteousness. When we find ourselves accused, we should not become defensive, we should not attempt to make excuses, but we should acknowledge any tendency and abandon any attempt at self-justification,

and flee to Christ. Only in Him will you find rescue and shelter and salvation.