

## **Romans: Objection Overruled (1)**

**Romans 3:1-4**

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As we begin to look at this passage, I would like to remind you that Paul is helping us, as believers, to know how to speak to unbelievers. We ask ourselves, how can we be more effective as we speak to our friends and our neighbors, and there are various programs by which you can be trained in this. For instance, in our church we offer the Evangelism Explosion program. But let me say that much of the New Testament is concerned directly with that particular issue. Romans is one of those books, and Paul has been giving hints about things to look out for and things to be ready to discuss. Paul has made it clear that all men need the gospel. Our generation, however, does not believe it needs the gospel. One reason is that many in our generation believe truth is relative. There are many ways up the mountain, equally valid, and the gospel is only one option. The New Testament will provide answers to these objections.

Paul is speaking to two communities, the Jewish and Gentile, neither of which believe they need the gospel. Now in Romans 3, Paul is going to meet two objections to the gospel. The Jewish people are going to say, if what you are saying is true, it's got at least these two problems. Paul, in this section, begins to answer these objections to the gospel. There are several questions I need to be prepared to answer. How does this inform how I ought to answer objections to the gospel, what are the obstacles to the gospel, what are some of the objections that they are going to raise and throw back at us? Well, if you will pay close attention to what Paul is doing, Paul is helping you even as he shows the gospel to you. And even as he deals with objections to the gospel, he's showing you how to tell the gospel and how to deal with objections to the gospel. The objections that we get today are substantially the same objections that the apostle Paul got to the gospel. And so if you will pay close attention to his line of argument, you yourself will learn how to respond in the context of gospel conversations to objections that you hear. Now that, of course, presupposes that you're having gospel conversations. Conversations about spiritual things of eternal significance with friends, with neighbors, with schoolmates, with people that are in graduate school with you or medical school, with colleagues, with relatives. We all ought to be thinking about the gospel and speaking about the gospel, especially with those who haven't embraced it. And Paul is giving you a

good model of just how you can do that.

The other thing I want to mention in passing before we read the text itself, as this is a perfect passage to have on a Sunday where you would minister the covenant sign of baptism, because Paul here speaks to issues of baptism and church membership which are significant. Paul is responding to an argument, in fact, in the passage we're going to read. It basically is saying "Well, Paul you are invalidating what the Bible, and by the Bible the person who is responding to Paul means the Old Testament, what the Bible says about membership in Israel and about the covenant sign of circumcision." And Paul says, "No, I'm not doing that at all." And so what Paul says here actually speaks to specific concerns that we have today with regard to baptism and church membership.

Thirdly, however, I want you to remember what Paul has been doing in Romans, chapter 2. Paul has been systematically kicking out from under the religious Jews of his day four legs on which they based their assurance. Their receipt of the law, their possession of the law of Moses; their divine, their national election by God. They had been chosen out from amongst all the nations. Their divine calling from God that was given even in the blessing to Abraham, that they were to be a light to the nations, a light to the Gentiles. And, of course, finally, circumcision itself. They had appealed to all four of these things, apart from the gospel, apart from belief in the fulfillment of the promises of God in the Old Testament and the person of Jesus, the Messiah. They had appealed to those four things apart from that belief in Christ, as the basis of why they were to be eternally secure. And basically Paul is saying, nope, you're not secure because of that, because of that, because of that. Why? He wants to drive them to despair, not because Paul doesn't want them to have assurance. He does want them to have assurance. In fact, he will devote a significant amount of the book of Romans to try and make sure that we do have assurance. But, before he wants to promote a true and sure and good assurance, he's got to remove a false assurance, a false security, a false comfort, a presumptuous relationship with God. People who are presuming upon God's blessings but shouldn't be. First he has to cause a crisis of despair before people can come to the fullness of assurance which is only based upon a living, saving relationship with Jesus Christ. And so that is what Paul has been doing all throughout Romans, chapter 2.

Now one last thing. Look back at the final verses of Romans, chapter 2. There you will see that Paul is specifically dealing with the situation of circumcision, and he has said, "Circumcision is of value (verse 25) if you practice the law. But if you are a transgressor of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision." And he has gone on to say this. "And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the law (verse 27) will he not judge you, who, though having the letter of the law and circumcision are a transgressor of the law." And then he has gone on to say in verse 29, "But he is a Jew who has won 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." Hold that thought in your mind, because you won't

understand the objection that is coming here in verses 1 through 4 of chapter 3 unless you remember what Paul has been doing in those previous verses. And so with that as introduction, let's hear God's holy word in Romans 3:

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. What, then, if some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, "That thou mightiest be justified in Thy words and mightiest prevail when Thou art judged." Amen.

And thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

*Our Father, we pray that You would press us with Paul's words. That You would make us uncomfortable in false assurance; that we might come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and to a full and real Christian assurance. We pray, Heavenly Father, for believers who struggle in these areas, that they would not be comforted; but they would, in fact, be strengthened in their faith, knowing the truth and knowing the way of true assurance. We ask, O God, that those unbelievers who are here in our midst today, who perhaps are comfortable in their sin and not uncomfortable about their eternal destiny might be made uncomfortable precisely so that they may find the comfort of God which is in Jesus Christ. All these things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Paul has been pounding away on the superficial and false assurance which the religious Jews of his day who have failed to embrace Jesus Christ have constantly been throwing in his face. Oh, but Paul, we have received the law. Paul, we have received the calling. Paul, we have received the choice of God. Paul, we've received the circumcision, the sign of Abraham. And he has done this in order to show them that when they argue for privileges or when they argue from privileges that God has given to them, apart from obedience, apart from faithful response to the promises of God, apart from the embrace of Jesus who is the Messiah, those privileges only condemn them. And he's gone through a series of them. The Jews have defended themselves, via the possession of the mosaic law, via God's national choice of Israel from amongst all the nations about which Moses speaks in Deuteronomy 7, based upon the calling which God gave to Abraham in Genesis 12, verses 1 through 3 and especially based upon their receipt of the sign of circumcision.

And against all these things, Paul has said, "Look, when I look at you, I see a life pattern of disobedience. When I look at you, I see people who really haven't ever understood the promises of God, and when I look at you I see people who have rejected Jesus who is the Messiah, who is the fulfillment of all those promises. And, therefore, I don't see any ground for you to be assured. I don't see any

ground for you to be confident of your relationship with God, and so especially as he speaks of their circumcision, he says, "Look, your circumcision means nothing unless it's circumcision of the heart." And immediately here in Romans, chapter 3, verse 1 he gets this objection. "Whoa, wait a minute, Paul. If that's the case, then you're saying that circumcision is worthless. You're saying that being a Jew is worthless. You're saying that being a part of the covenant community is worthless. And to say that, Paul, would be to say that God who instituted those things in the Old Testament had instituted something of no value and no use." And Paul responds, "Oh no, that's not what I mean at all." I want you to see two objections in this passage which are raised against Paul's teaching. And then two answers from Paul. But I want you see as deal with it what Paul is having to say here is not only significant for first century Jews who have inherited a tremendous religious tradition, and yet who are trusting in the husk without trusting in the kernel of promise. What Paul says is also applicable to us, especially those of us who have had the privilege of growing up within the visible church, within the gospel preaching visible church, and those who have had the privileges of receiving the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. What Paul has to say to us is just as sharp and just as applicable as it is to them.

### **I. The signs confirm a covenant promise, but the promise must be embraced in order to eventuate in blessing.**

So, first of all, let's look at verses 1 and 2 where Paul encounters this first objection. It's stated in the form of a question. I suspect that Paul has not only regularly had this question asked to him as he preached. Remember, his pattern was to preach in the synagogue for three Saturdays. Three Saturdays he would preach in the synagogue. And then he would pull a small group of folks together, and he would begin to train them in the ways of Christ. And no doubt in the context of that training, he would get, "but what about, but what about, but what about, so this question is something that Paul has heard many times. I also suspect that Paul thought this himself about the Christian teaching from time to time.

But, one might say, those Christians, if they really take that to logical extent, it just means that all the ordinances of God in the Old Testament meant nothing. And so Paul is very studied in his reply. He hits this one right on the head in his response. He's got this objection. It's in the form of a question. "What is the advantage of being a Jew then, Paul? If what you are saying is true, what's the advantage of being a Jew? And Paul, if what you're saying is true, why bother being circumcised in the first place? Why would God have even given that ordinance if what you are saying is true? If it's true, if you're not circumcised, if you're only circumcised outwardly, you're only circumcised if the Spirit circumcises you, why not just forget the circumcision of the flesh and go right to the circumcision of the spirit? Why not?" And the apostle Paul says, "Oh, no, that argument won't wash. There is a great advantage to being a Jew. There's a great

advantage of being a part of the covenant community which God first manifested Himself in. There's a great advantage in these Old Testament ordinances which have been given to you." And he begins in his retort to show specifically what that advantage has been.

Now I want you to note, if you'll look at verse 2, that he says, "First of all," and then he only gives one thing, and he never comes to second. Preachers get carried away, you know. Sometimes it takes them a while to get back to the number two, again, you know. You've never experienced that, of course from me, but it does happen to some preachers. Now, if you'll look ahead in Romans, chapter 9, you will see that he has not forgotten the thought. Look ahead to Romans, chapter 9, because in verses 4 and 5 he does list some other advantages of the Jewish people. Notice what he says. "To whom belong the adoption as sons? The glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the temple server, the promises, the fathers, from whom is the Messiah." All these things, you see, he could have given more. But he focuses them on one thing in Romans 3, verse 2. The receipt of the oracles of God. I want you to just think about that for a few moments. Paul is saying, "Look, of course there is an advantage to being a Jew. Of course there's an advantage to having received the sacrament, this ordinance which points to the word of God's promise because you, among all people, God has chosen to be the trustees of the oracles of God."

Now think about what that means for a minute. First of all, I think Paul is thinking specifically of the words of covenant promise that God gave to Abraham in the very context in which he gave him circumcision. You see, the circumcision by itself means nothing, but that promise means everything. But the promise is not effectual for blessing unless it's embraced. You have to believe the promise. You have to receive the promise. You have to embrace the promise in order for it to be effective for blessing. And so Paul is just reminding us here that the signs confirm the promise. But the promise must be embraced in order for the blessing to eventuate. And so he says you are the recipients of the oracles of God, right in the context of them wanting to argue with Him about circumcision, he says, "Remember that behind that circumcision, behind that covenant sign, there was a promise from God. Why did God give that covenant sign in the first place? To confirm His word of promise." And so Paul drives them right back to the oracles of God. It's a beautiful move, isn't it. You know they're trusting in something superficial separated from the word. What's Paul doing? He's putting the sacrament right back with the word. To point them back to what the sacrament points to itself in order that they will embrace the reality of the sacrament and not just hold to some meaningless tradition which they don't even know why they're doing or doing for the wrong reason. But when he says 'the oracles of God,' he means something even broader than that word of promises. He, in fact, means the entirety of the revelation that God has given to Israel that is inscribed in the Old Testament.

Now think about it for a few minutes, friends. Amongst all the people in the world,

God determines to reveal Himself alone in the days of the Old Testament to the Jewish people. Those outside of Israel that are introduced to God in the Old Testament are normally done so only through the ministrations of the people of Israel. And so Paul says, "Look, God has entrusted you with His oracles, the one people in the world that God has revealed Himself to." And furthermore, he speaks of these oracles of God referring to the written transcript of the revelations that God has given from the time of Adam through the last of the prophets, Malachi. God spoke to Adam, God spoke to the patriarchs, God spoke to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God revealed Himself in dreams to Joseph. God spoke to and by Moses, the prophet, and by all the succession of prophets that followed him." And Paul is saying, "God has entrusted the oracles. He has entrusted the knowledge of Himself uniquely revealed. Everybody in the world has God's image written on their very being. They bear the image of God. Everybody in the world knows the law of God, and they know that God ought to be worshiped. But because of sin they suppress that, and uniquely to Israel God has revealed Himself. And furthermore that revelation has been written down so that it is contained in a Book. The Old Testament we call it. And so Paul says, "Look, you've received the oracles of God," and notice what He's calling Scripture. The oracles of God.

Now look, my friends, I know today that the predominant view of the Bible is not out there. That it is the oracles of God. You know people will say, "Well, you know, the Bible is a religious book written by spiritual men who some of them had mystical experiences, and they were doing the best they could to describe in their own words their encounter with the ultimate." That may be what a lot of people think about the Bible. That is not what the Bible thinks about itself. And it's certainly what Paul thinks about the Bible. There are people who say, "Well, the Bible is not revelation. The Bible is human witness to revelation." Revelation is the great encounter. It's the existential event in which we have an I-Thou meeting with the Almighty. And then we go back and we write about it. It's sort of like a diary, a journal. And then this happened to me and then this happened to me. That is not what the Bible says about itself. The Bible says it is the revelation of God, and it is the revelation of God written. It's an amazing thing, my friends. You can hold divine revelation in your hands.

Paul was not afraid of being accused of being a bibliolater, because Paul knew that you can't worship the one true God and reject His word. You can't worship the one true God and make light of His word. You can't say, "Well, I love God, but you know, His word, it's a mess. You got to pick and choose in there. There's some crazy things in the word." Paul knew that His word is the oracle of himself. It's His own self-revelation. And this is right where Paul presses when he says, "What's the advantage of being a Jew? What's the advantage of the ordinance of circumcision?" You have been the recipients of the oracles of God, the one people in the world to whom God has revealed himself in a special and unique way. Think about it. It's hard to illustrate this. But think about it. Let's assume that there was one school in the world that could teach you the secret of knowing

God. Entrance into that school was by invitation of God only. But the children of those who had been invited to those who had been invited to those schools were automatically enrolled and invited to enter into that school. That school was located in one nation, not in many, but in one nation. Those who go through that school are uniquely exposed to the knowledge of God and how to live with Him, relate to Him, worship and serve Him forever. Going through that school does not necessarily guarantee that you will, in fact, worship and serve Him forever.

But let me ask you this. Is it an advantage to be invited to that school? Is it an advantage to be a child of someone who has been invited to that school. You better believe it, Paul is saying. Of course, it's an advantage. It's an incredible advantage. There's nothing like it in the world. Yes, the people of that school are supposed to go to all nations and tell the nations about the Lord. And they are to invite them back to that school. But Paul is saying, "This is the one place; of course it's an advantage." And so he rebuts this idea that he is in fact making light of the privileges that God has given to the people of Israel.

## **II. God's faithfulness to His covenant promises can be manifested in wrath as well as mercy.**

But he's not finished, because there's another objection lurking behind this one in verse 3. Look at the objection. What then, if some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God. You see the objection. It's coming. Hold on, Paul. Now you're saying that circumcision did mean something. That membership in the Jewish community did mean something. Well, then, answer me this. In the covenant sign of circumcision, what was the great thing that was to be set forth? I will be your God; you will be My people. Well, hold on, Paul. You're saying that through unfaithfulness, through unbelief, many Jewish people have not obtained that promise for which they had received the sign of circumcision. Doesn't that call into question the faithfulness of God? I mean, God told them to receive the sign. And intimated in the sign that He would redeem them, that He would save them, that He would be their guide, and they would be His people.

But you're saying, Paul, that many Jewish people rejected Him. Doesn't that call into question the faithfulness of God, the truthfulness of God, the veracity of God, the plan of God, the promise of God? And I want you to note how Paul answers this question. He uses the strongest response that he can find. He uses this response over and over in Romans and elsewhere. It's translated various ways. May it never be as one way. But the King James gets it just right, based on the way the Old Testament Greek translation translated some of the words of the prophets. "God forbid."

And Paul brings two arguments in verse 4 against the idea that we could ever even conceive that God would be unfaithful to His promises. First of all, he says,

"It is actually impossible for God to be unfaithful. Let God be found true," he says. "And every man." If you stack everybody in the world in this corner and God over here, you go with God. You know there's something in that in recognizing the essential faithfulness of God. Because events in our lives which are difficult for us to bear, our first instinct is to think that we are, or would be more faithful than God, if we were in His place. And that God is being unfaithful. And the apostle is saying, "Oh, no. You stack everybody up in the world on this side, and God on this side. God's faith will bear not." And he quotes from Jeremiah and from some of the Psalms to do it.

But then he clinches his argument by going to Psalm 51, verse 4. Now you remember the context of that Psalm. You may want to look at it. David has sinned; he has broken every one of the Ten Commandments, especially the Commandments against adultery and murder. In the context of his confession, he says, "Lord, I have received your discipline in order that when You speak, You may be justified." In other words Lord, I acknowledge that I deserve -- Your punishment of me was justified.

By the way, this is a very kind thing that Paul is doing. I would have been so miffed by this time with the objection, that I would have drawn an illustration from Esau, you know. When they say, "Well, what about circumcision?" I would have said what about Esau? But Paul's kind. He goes to a believing, sinful, but repentant, Israelite, David. And he says, "You know, even David recognized that when God seemed to be being unfaithful to His promises of mercy, He was in fact being faithful precise in His punishment of sin because He deserved it. Maybe Paul's even hinting. You know, if you would be like David you would find out how faithful God is. You'd find out how merciful He is. What he is indicating is that God is faithful even in His punishment of sin even when that sin is being done by His covenant people who have received the covenant sign. Because there are two ways for God to be faithful in response to the giving of the covenant sign to the covenant community. He can be faithful in blessing as we trust and obey, or He can be faithful in wrath if we reject those promises and live apart from His word and His law. Either way, God is faithful. The question is, easy way or the hard way, as our parents used to say. God's faithful, He's always faithful, because the covenant sign itself, though it always entails privileges, it also entails responsibilities. And when the covenant promise is rejected, or when it's neglected, or when it's taken for granted, it's presumed upon, then God's wrath is visited. And it is not a manifestation of Him being unfaithful. Oh, no, because even when He called Abraham out of the Ur of the Chaldees by His grace, He required Abraham to leave his family and to leave his country.

The covenant always entails responsibilities. It's established by grace, it's received by grace. We're kept by grace in it, but it always entails responsibilities. And Paul is saying, "Look, God has not been unfaithful. That's not an objection that will work against my gospel. In fact, the very objection points out your need to repent, that you might find His faithfulness to be manifested on you in mercy,



not in wrath. May God bless His word. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we bow before You, and we ask that You would enable us to truly embrace Your promises in Jesus Christ, to trust in Him alone for salvation, and not to trust in things of our own invention whether that be our suspicion that you're going to let everybody off the hook, whether it be our suspicion that we're really basically good people and how could You possibly keep us out of heaven. Whether it is simply our suspicion that this idea that there will be a final judgment is just something that somebody has dreamed up along the way. Whatever the defense mechanism we have put up in front of Your gospel to try and deflect its claims, we pray that You would tear down in Your grace and enable us to trust in Jesus alone, who is the only hope of salvation. We ask these things in His name, Amen.*

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