“THIS IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND” - COMPLEXITY IN THE BIBLE.

A warning from the Apostle Peter:

2 Peter 3: 15-17

“And count the patience of the Lord as salvation, just as your beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Peter was talking about this section of Romans in his letter. And he is warning us, ahead of time, to grow in our knowledge, and be on the lookout for ignorance and instability, that cause us to twist the scriptures, carry us away into error, leading ultimately to our destruction.

The beginning of chapter 3 contains some very complex and careful reasoning, that is easy to dismiss because it doesn’t seem very practical or relevant at first glance. However, just because it is complex and nuanced, does not mean it is impossible to understand! In fact, there are many plain things that are taught in Romans, even at face value, that are dismissed, because they are difficult to swallow, because passages such as this one are neglected, glossed over, or considered somehow secondary or unimportant.

But this is The Word of God! It is breathed out by Him, and it is profitable. We should allow ourselves to be taught by it, reproved by it, corrected by it, and trained for righteousness by it, so that we may be complete, and equipped for every good work.

My task today is to help us understand what Paul is saying, why he is saying it, and what bearing it has on our lives, so that we are not carried about on every wind and wave of doctrine, or human deceit that comes along, so that we will have bedrock in our lives when trials come.

QUICK RECAP

Paul begins his letter with an emphatic statement:
Romans 1:14–18 (ESV)
I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

And he goes on to show, very incisively, how everyone, Jew and Greek alike, suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. Yes, even the Jews themselves are unrighteous or unjustified. This would have been a shocking statement to them, because they believed that they were right with God, that they were justified before him, because of their Jewishness. After all, they thought, they were circumcised, showing that they were members of God’s covenant (so they thought), and they were entrusted with The Law! So they were special to God, right?

According to Paul, no. God shows no partiality (Romans 2:11), God judges all men according to their works, and He judges all men according to one standard of righteousness, and all men fall short of that standard, including the Jews.

And his proof was in fact that their sinful behavior, their breaking of God’s law, caused God to be blasphemed among the gentiles. Far from being righteous or justified, or right-with-God, they were in fact, shaming His name through their law-breaking. Their circumcision might as well have been “uncircumcision.”

This shocking statement of Paul’s would have raised some serious questions and objections among his hearers, questions that he spends the next nine chapters addressing in greater and greater detail, all the while unfolding the correct understanding of God’s purpose, plan, and promise for His people.

We pick up chapter three with the first of those questions. Chapter three marks the next big division of content in the letter to the Romans, by beginning this question-and-answer format.

WHAT ADVANTAGE HAS THE JEW? MUCH!

Romans 3:1-2
1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? 2 Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

If God shows no partiality, then what is the point of Jewishness? Did God waste the last 4,000 years of human history on calling out a chosen nation of people? Was Paul saying that God was starting completely over from scratch now? What was this heresy Paul was bringing?

Paul says that if you understand his argument as meaning that God had wasted His time in calling out a chosen people to be holy and blameless, then you are misunderstanding his argument. The jew has much advantage in every way!
ENTRUSTED WITH THE ORACLES OF GOD

They were given God’s Word! What a huge advantage! They were given the full and clear revelation of what God required for participation with Him in His work of blessing the entire world. The rest of mankind was not given the full, explicit, written-down explanation. (This is what “oracles” mean, the written down, explicit explanation.) The rest of man was given general revelation of nature (chapter 1), and of their conscience (the law of God was written on their heart, we learn in chapter 2).

MAN’S FAITHLESSNESS DOES NOT NULIFY GOD’S FAITHFULNESS.

Romans 3:3-4
3 What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? 4 By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,

“That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.” (referenced from Psalm 51:4 LXX)

Does their faithlessness nullify advantage they have? After all it doesn’t seem to have led to any benefit...

No! Man’s faithlessness does not nullify God’s faithfulness. In fact, it is not overboard to say that this is the central message of the entire Old Testament! Paul is going to unpack this thought later in his letter (keep in mind that the recipients would have heard the whole thing in one sitting), but he previews the idea here, and it is so important that we get this.

Even if every human being were a liar, God’s Word, His unconditional promises would still be true. This thought, that man’s faithlessness cannot nullify God’s faithfulness, is central to the rest of Paul’s whole message. Paul is making something that we get really hazy on clear for us: God never breaks His promises to us, even though we break ours to him, to others, and to ourselves.

Paul’s whole message of salvation in the rest of this letter centers on this idea. In spite of Israel’s constant failures, God remains faithful to His promises. How encouraging for us, who also fail God daily!

As we are going to see when we get into chapters 9-11, God even uses Israel’s failure to obey His law as part of His overall plan in bringing men and women from every nation on earth into His family.

Paul is anticipating objections to his message here, and reminds them of Psalm 51:4. Why does he go there? He is calling to mind the story of David and Bathsheba. David thought, that as God’s chosen king of Israel, that he could do as he pleased and that he would not be judged in the same way that other men were judged.

But at the end of the story, when he was confronted by the prophet Nathan, and shown his sinfulness, he repented, and wrote Psalm 51, which essentially is saying “I have sinned against you horribly, you are right to judge me. I used to judge you as incorrect for judging my sin, I thought i was special, but now I see that you were absolutely in the right for judging me.”
And Paul is inviting us to agree with David, and to own those words as our own.

When we see our sin clearly, we see that God’s judgement of our sin proves his righteousness, his rightness in judgement. Prior to seeing our sin clearly, we tend to think we have an excuse for our sin, and we tend to believe that we will not ultimately be judged and condemned for our sin. But when we see our sin clearly, we see that God is right to judge.

This is how our unrighteousness serves to show God's rightness. Even if we are unbelieving now, and don’t see it, we will definitely see it on judgement day, that we are great sinners, and God is a righteous judge. He is right, we were wrong. Paul’s statement: “let God be true though every one were a liar” is not a wish, it is a pronouncement!

And then we back up to Paul’s original assertion in chapter 1, that God's righteousness is made known through our unrighteousness:

**WHY DOES GOD INFLICT WRATH ON US?**

*Romans 3:5-8*

5 But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) 6 By no means! For then how could God judge the world? 7 But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? 8 And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

Paul anticipates an objection to his argument so far. It is a weak one, and easily dismissed, but brilliantly done so. “Don’t you believe God is going to judge the world? Of course you do!” All of you believe that God is going to judge the world. If you don’t believe that it is because you haven’t thought it through.

It would be unloving of God to not judge the world! To simply dismiss everyone’s sin. To let injustice go unavenged? Would it be loving to a rape victim if God simply dismissed the rapist from his punishment? No! What about Hitler and leading an army to exterminate millions of Jews and others? What about the Japanese during the rape of Nanking, or any of the hundreds of other terrorist dictators that have ever lived throughout history? Murderers, thieves, con artists, liars... would it be loving to the victims of these crimes if God simply let them go without any recourse whatever? Of course not.

Paul’s simple and brilliant response to this argument shows the short sighted-ness of it. He’s going to deal with this question several other ways throughout the letter, keep an eye out for it.

So, Jews have a distinct advantage in this relationship to God, and their faithlessness has not removed the advantage (because of the nature of the advantage!) Some of God’s promises were unconditional, and the others in fact prophesied that failure was going to happen. The “oracles” Israel was give had said explicitly that they would fail. (See Deuteronomy). So Israel’s unfaithfulness, in fact confirms God’s truthfulness, and magnifies God’s faithfulness so we can see it more distinctly.
God promised Abraham that He would be his God, and that he would be blessed, no conditions added. God promised the nation of Israel blessing for obedience, curses for disobedience, and restoration for repentance. That promise still stands, no conditions added.

He revealed to them exactly how He would interact with them, and exactly what He required of them.

So then comes the next question. Paul says they have a massive advantage, but did that advantage do them any good?

ARE JEWS ANY BETTER OF? NOT AT ALL.

Romans 3:9-18
9 What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, 10 as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;  
11 no one understands;  
no one seeks for God.  
12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;  
no one does good, not even one.” (from Psalm 14:1-3 & 53:1-3)

13 “Their throat is an open grave;  
they use their tongues to deceive.” (Psalm 5:9)

“The venom of asps is under their lips.” (Psalm 140:3)

14 “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” (Psalm 10:7)

15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
16 in their paths are ruin and misery,  
17 and the way of peace they have not known.” (Isaiah 59:7-8)  
18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Psalm 36:1)

All of these quotations are about Gentile & Jew alike, most specifically about Jews, who think that they will not be called to account for their sins.

These verses are precious to me. They remind me of who I am, in my flesh. I relate very readily to them.

I am prone to think that in fact on my own I do understand (have wisdom), when in fact any understanding I do have comes as a gift from God. This keeps me humble in an area I would otherwise tend to be very proud about in my flesh.

I am prone to think that I am in fact a pretty good person. These verses remind me to take a look at my heart, and see how black and selfish it actually is, without the Holy Spirit correcting and training me.
I am constantly aware, because of the conviction of the Holy Spirit through this verse, how prone to
deceit and venom and bitterness my tongue is left to myself. In fact, I might say that this was my primary
besetting sin prior to coming to Christ, and it is the one I am most aware of to this day. Venom in my
words, and the temptation toward deceit to make myself look good, or to cover over problems that
should come to light.

You’ll notice in fact, that this comment about the tongue reflects the “vice list” in chapter 1:29-31. The sins
listed there are primarily sins of the tongue. This is why James wrote in his letter that anyone who can
keep himself from sinning in what we say, is a perfect man.

Swiftness to shed blood is one we tend to absolve ourselves of fairly quickly, but this scripture shines
light on that part of my flesh that wants revenge, wants blood, when I am wronged or offended. Inside of
me is violence that God is conquering through the power of His Spirit, but it remains there nonetheless.
Spitefulness and vengeance, grudge-holding and unforgiveness are all wrapped up in these verses, and
all of these reside in my flesh.

How about yours?

There is something wrong with your understanding of sin and righteousness, if you think you are not a
sinner at heart. The Bible calls that spiritual blindness. If you read these verses and cannot think how you
fit into them, you are spiritually blind.

[Potential aside…]

Now to correct an error on the other extreme, which is far less common, but exists in the very religious
and self-righteous among us. These verses do not mean that unbelievers are incapable of doing any
kind of good deeds whatever. Unbelievers build hospitals, help neighbors, donate money to good
causes, are kind people, work hard for others, all the time. Paul's point is that compared to God’s
righteousness, these deeds are nothing.

And the whole thrust of his argument so far is that no one is good all the time. In fact even the way in
which we “do good deeds” is insufficient to escape the judgement “no one does good.” Our motives are
mixed at best, and wholly self-interested most of the time.

But from an earthly standpoint, there are many unbelievers who are “better people” than many believers.
Moral virtue, ethical behavior, kindness, selflessness are not the marks to look at, unless these things
exist in perfection. Repentance is what is being looked for, precisely because no one is perfect.

And even if true moral virtue, ethical behavior, and selflessness do exist, they exist as an echo of God's
revealed word. Because of our sinfulness, we only know what it means to truly be virtuous or ethical,
because of God's word, either explicitly received in the Bible, because of a cultural pattern we have
inherited that is founded on Biblical morality, or because of the revelation we have in nature, or in our
hearts as created in the image of God.
Romans 3:19-20
19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

“The effect of an understanding of the scriptures is to silence us.” Martin Lloyd-Jones.

Are you still arguing that you aren’t included in the list of chapter one, or in the onslaught of Psalms and prophets he just listed? Then you haven’t understood the scriptures. You are still blind.

We are all “held accountable” - hypodikos in greek, under-justice, “Subject to judgement”, “shown to be guilty”. No human being will be justified by works of the law, precisely because no one keeps the law perfectly. We come to understand, through our experience of failure to keep the law, that we are sinners.

So in chapters 1 and 2, and the first part of 3, Paul has utterly demolished any hope of claiming a righteousness that comes from anything we do or are. Whether it be religious conformity, or by doing good deeds, or being a good person. He speaks specifically to jews, but by way of application he shows that this also applies to all men. “If you haven’t kept the God-given law, how can anyone hope to please him by making their own law up.”

THERE IS GOOD NEWS COMING!

Taking a brief look ahead into the rest of the chapter, Paul is going to say that righteousness comes not by works or religious identity, but from God himself as a gift. Believe it, and it is yours for the taking.

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO US GENTILE BELIEVERS?

1. **We have the oracles of God!** - We now have the clear revelation of God, just as the Jews did! Be careful that we don’t squander it the way they did.

2. **Be careful about arguing with God’s clearly revealed ways.** - When reading through Romans, be careful to let it “read you”. Don’t put yourself in Paul’s seat when reading, put yourself in the place of the one he is speaking to. Be sure that you are not arguing back to God, or His apostle when clear and hard revelation is given.

3. **Be careful about saying “I can go ahead and sin, god will forgive me.”** - Do not presume upon the riches of God’s kindness. Your sin stirs up God’s wrath! That wrath was poured out on Christ. God does not simply dismiss your sin. He punishes it. You will have earthly consequences here, and eternal consequences if you do not repent of it.

4. **Be careful about claiming any righteousness that comes from your own deeds, even as a believer.** - Your righteousness comes as a gift from God. Your good deeds (obedience to His command) are a response of gratitude and love for Him.