

Romans 3:1-5 by Wayne Barber

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Modified from Irving L. Jensen's excellent work " Jensen's Survey of the NT "				

Related Resource:

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Romans 3:1-5: Man's Desperation for God's Good News, Part 5 by Dr. Wayne A. Barber

Well, as we move into the third chapter of Romans, let's take a look at Acts 21. I believe it will help us understand this chapter better. This event happened after Paul wrote the book of Romans. It gives you an indication of the problem that Paul faced every time he mentioned the Jew. In Acts 21 Paul had gone to Jerusalem and was on his way to Rome. In Romans 1:15 he says, "I can't wait to see you. I am coming to you by way of Spain." Paul doesn't realize how difficult it was going to be when he got to Jerusalem.

He went to the Council of Elders there in Jerusalem and said, "Guys, I have got good news. The Gentiles are responding to the gospel like you would not believe." They said, "Paul, that is real good, but we have some Jews over here who have also believed. They, however, are still hung up in the Law. They've been saved by grace but are still being kept by the law. They are immature. They are publicly criticizing you. They think you are preaching against them, against their temple and against their law. Paul, we have four men who are under a Nazarite vow. We want you to take them down to the Temple, pay their vows and let the Jewish believers see you down there so that you can silence some of the criticism that is coming toward you."

Well, Paul does what he is asked to do. He gets down to the Temple, and there were some Jews there from over in Asia Minor. That is where Paul's ministry had largely been. They knew Paul, and they did not like Paul. They thought he was a traitor, that he had defected from their cause. So they brought up a false charge on him.

We pick up the story Acts 21:27: "And when the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the multitude and laid hands on him [seized him], crying out, 'Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people, and the Law, and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the

temple and defiled this holy place."

In the Temple they had a barrier. It was called the dividing wall. Any foreigner [Gentile] who went behind this wall was under the penalty of death. And if you were a Jew and you took a Gentile behind the dividing wall, the same penalty fell upon you.

They had seen him with a man by the name of Trophimus (verse 29), who was from that area. They said, "Since he takes the temple, and the Law, and us so lightly, he has taken this man behind the dividing wall." As a result they bring a false charge on him, and he ends up spending almost five years of his life in prison. He gets to Rome all right, but he gets to Rome in shackles.

These Jews not only have a problem with what he is saying, they have a problem with the one who is saying it. They look at him as a defector, a traitor. They were saying, "You have abandoned the cause and you are preaching against our temple. You are preaching down the name Jew and our Law."

Well, the Apostle Paul is about to correct that. In fact, it is almost as if he anticipates the antagonistic feeling he is getting from the Jews to whom he is writing there in Rome. Look in Romans 2:28-29: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 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."

There is only one logical question you could ask if you were a Jew hearing what Paul had said. Paul anticipates it and asks it in Romans 3:1: "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?" Now you can see how they feel. They are saying, "Hey, all of our life we were told we were special. We were told we were God's people. Now what advantage is it to be a Jew if to be a Jew is inward? What advantage is circumcision if circumcision is of the heart?" You have to remember something. Paul is not just writing this on his own. This is the divinely inspired Word of God. This is not Paul reasoning with the Jews. This is God using His man to reason with the Jews. Every word is absolutely inspired of God.

He uses two words in verse 1 that bring the case to the surface. He uses the word advantage: "Then what advantage has the Jew?" The word "advantage" is *perissos*. It means something that is extended beyond what somebody else has. In other words, it is over and above what everybody else gets. That is exactly the mindset of the Jew—"We are better than the Gentile. We have more than they have." They said, "Now wait a minute. If all of this is true then what do we have that is better than the Gentiles? It would have been better for us to have been born one of them."

Second is the word "benefit" which is the Greek word *ophelēia*. It has to do with privilege, special privilege. They were complaining, "You mean, we don't get any perks from being a Jew? We don't get any special privileges? You mean we don't have any advantage over the Gentile at all?" Paul's answer surprised me. You would think Paul would say, "Absolutely none. You don't have an advantage being a Jew." But he doesn't do that. Look at what he says in verse 2: "Great in every respect." The word for "great" is the word *polus*, which means huge, over abundance: I can't begin to tell you what an advantage you have.

"In every respect" means that in any direction you look you have an advantage. You have great advantage by being a Jew. It is almost as if Paul anticipates that antagonistic attitude they have towards him. But he is going to show them that the advantage they have is not what they thought it was. They had totally abused every bit of it. I want you to see how he does this. He is building the case not only against them but also against himself. Paul himself had to be changed by the message of the good news. He knew so much about them because he used to be one of them.

Let's start in the middle part of verse 2. He says, "First of all." When I see a phrase like that in Scripture I assume he is going to have a second and third and fourth and fifth. The problem here is, there is nothing else. There is just number one. The word means the one who is preeminent, the summing it all up. Paul was saying, "Here is what you have. Nothing else matters. This is the advantage you have as Jews."

Look what he says, "First of all, that they [their forefathers] were entrusted with the oracles of God." So what is the advantage the Jew has? It is not in who you are. It is in what you know. It is in what God had privileged them to know that He had not privileged the Gentile world to know. They knew the will and the purpose of God. They knew it. God had revealed it to every one of them.

The term "oracles of God" is sort of a unique term. It doesn't necessarily refer right to the written Word. The word "logos" would refer to the written Word. This is the word *logion* and it refers more to the sayings, the declarations, those things that God had spoken that would reveal the deep things of God, reveal His will and reveal His purpose. Now obviously they were written down. The Law was spoken to Moses and then given on tablets. The truths were spoken through the prophets. The truth was written by David in the Psalms and they were singing it. But it was all these different pieces of the puzzle that God had, out of His kindness, allowed Israel to have. The advantage that Israel had was the knowledge God had given to them.

The word "oracles of God" is used in Acts 7:38 after Moses had been up on Mt. Sinai and had gotten the Law. He came down and spoke the oracles of God. It is used in Hebrews 5:12, 1 Peter 4:11 and each time God declares, manifests and reveals what is

spoken. So, it has to do with the spoken revelations of God.

Jesus alludes to this in Luke 24:44: "He said to them, 'These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.'" The privilege they had was not just knowledge, but the knowledge they had about Jesus Christ who was the very embodiment of the good news.

The reason I think Paul is talking about the same thing in Romans 3 is because in verses 9-20 he calls all three of those to the stand. As a prosecuting attorney, building the case that God has against the Jew, he calls forth the Psalms; he calls forth the Prophets and then he calls forth the Law. So what advantage did the Jew have? The advantage was what he knew about God and what he knew about Christ. Christ had been prophesied in the writings that God had revealed to him. So he should have been a person filled with great advantage.

But did they respect what God has revealed to him? As a matter of fact, they lost the Law of God. Now it is one thing to lose your wallet or your shopping list, but when you lose the very revelation of the moral code of God and you could take it so lightly, that is the way they disrespected what God had given them as a privilege. They lost the Law of God. Hilkiah the high priest found it in the Temple when they came back out of captivity. The book of Nehemiah talks about how they came forth and Ezra read the law in front of all of the people. If you want some Scripture references on that, look in II Kings 22:3-20 and Nehemiah 8:1-6.

Why didn't they want what God had revealed to them? Because it convicted them. So they came up with their own standard of righteousness and put it in something called the Talmud. They spent more time with the oral law and the traditional law, which they came up with, than they ever did with that which God had revealed to them. You can go to Israel today and it is still the same. They are built into what man has come up, not with what God has ordered.

So, was it an advantage to be a Jew? Paul said, "Well, yes and no. Yes, look at all the knowledge you have. But no, you did not respect it." Romans 2:4 says that all the things God has done, all of His lovingkindness and good things, were to lead them to repentance. But instead, they were led into arrogance and insolence and decided to use what they knew to judge the lost world, but not let it lead them to repentance. That was the indictment against every one of the Jews.

Paul is saying, "That is going to be the essence of your judgment. You have never allowed the favor of God to lead you to brokenness and surrender to Jesus Christ. You know about Him. You are privileged to know about Him. But you chose to conveniently leave Him out of your knowledge."

Well, did they have an advantage? Yes, but it was not what they thought. The advantage they had was what they knew God had revealed to them. Now when a person will not allow God's word to lead him to repentance when he is privileged to know it and understand it, there are two things he will do. Number one is found in verses 3 and 4. He will take the wonderful truths, in this case the faithfulness of God, and twist them to justify his own sin. Now if you are a religious person, you have knowledge. But if you are not allowing that knowledge to bring you to the cross in brokenness and confession and repentance, then you are taking the wonderful truth of God and you are twisting it to justify your own sin.

Let me show you what I am talking about. In verse 3 Paul anticipates another question and he asked it: "If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?" You can almost picture him sensing that these Jews were getting a little nervous. If I was a Jew sitting in the service while Paul was preaching, I would be real nervous by now. As a matter of fact, if I weren't willing to repent, I would be trying to come up with something to defend myself. You can almost sense them doing that. Paul senses the same thing and asks the question that they are going to ask him.

Remember the false security of the Jew was the covenant with Abraham and God, the unconditional, everlasting covenant with Abraham and God. Abraham, of course, passed that on to Isaac. Isaac had two sons. Jacob became the one with the birthright. Jacob's name was changed to Israel. Israel had twelve sons. From them we got the twelve tribes of Israel.

Now, God made an everlasting covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 12 He singles him out. In chapter 15 He makes a covenant with him and promises him three things, a land, a nation, and a seed through which all nations on this earth will be blessed. Galatians 3 says that Seed is Jesus Christ. That is where we find the everlasting covenant. When we receive Christ, we are a part of what God promised to Abraham. That is part of it. But you have to remember something. Every time He promised an unconditional promise, He didn't promise that to a Jew individually, He promised it to Israel as a nation collectively. Now they had conveniently forgotten that. No, they didn't forget it. They knew it. But they sort of picked the Old Testament in a cafeteria style.

That is what Jesus said to those two disciples walking to Emmaus on the day of resurrection. He said, "You are foolish. You are slow of heart [intentionally slow] to believe all that the prophets have said. You are not looking at everything. You are just looking at the pieces you want to pick and choose." Every promise God gave in Genesis 12:3, Isaiah 44:1-5 and Zechariah 12:10 was to them as a nation.

Whenever God made a promise to an individual that required obedience, it was always attached to the most severe of warnings. He says in Amos 3:2, "You are my chosen people. Therefore, I will punish each one of you greatly because of your disobedience." They missed Deuteronomy 28:29 where it says, "If you honor Me, I will bless you. If you dishonor Me, I will curse you." They overlooked all of that. They ignored the judgment of God. God said, "If you are not going to obey Me from your heart, then I am going to judge you individually and if the nation sins, I will do it collectively. But I am still going to honor My covenant with you as a nation."

God is not through with Israel. Paul is going to pick that subject up in Romans 11. As far as Israel as a nation, He is still going to honor His covenant. It is not going to be every individual Jew, but as a nation He has something for them at the end of the 70th week of Daniel which will be their day of atonement, their time of repentance, the time when they see Jesus for who He is, and the time when they will come into the kingdom. Zechariah says one-third will be left and those are the ones He still remembers.

They are asking, "If some do not believe, that won't nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?" You see, they never felt like they were going to be judged as individuals. They thought they were exempt because of being in the nation. In verse 4 Paul says, "May it never be! [That is the strongest negative you can find in the Greek language.] Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, 'That Thou mightest be justified in Thy words, and mightest prevail when Thou art judged.'"

Look with me in Psalm 51 and we will find out what he quotes. He picks out the time when David had sinned. Because he had sinned, God dealt with him on the basis of that sin. He had sinned with Bathsheba, and Nathan the prophet had come to him and said, "You are the man." Now here in Psalm 51 David is repenting. Look at his prayer beginning in verse 2: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." David knew he was responsible for his sin, and that God had a right to judge him individually for his sin. Verse 3 goes on, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight so that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, and blameless when Thou dost judge."

What God is saying is, "I'll honor My covenant with Israel. But you, as individuals will be judged for the sin in your own life, even David, your hero knew that." David prayed, "Oh, God, take not Thy spirit from me." Because they knew God would be faithful to all of Israel, they built their hopes upon it, culled out all the other verses and built a false theology that allowed them to sin and get away with it. When you don't allow God's Word to lead you to repentance, this is exactly what you will do. It is amazing how people who won't respond to truth will take the Word and twist it and make it into some justification for what they really want to do.

But is it an advantage to be a Jew? It may not be if you are not letting that lead you to repentance. "That is going to be a stronger judgment in your case," Paul is saying, "because you have been given knowledge. You know about Him and you have rejected Him."

Well, the second thing they are going to do is they will turn it into a license to sin. As a matter of fact, Paul himself was convicted of this. There was an antinomian problem in the church. "Anti" means against, "nomian" comes from the word "*nomos*" which means law. There were those who said we are against anything to do with the law. As a result, they developed a lifestyle of licentiousness. So, in their thinking, God, because of His grace and His righteous character, just allows you to do whatever you want to do. As a matter of fact, the more you do wrong, the better you make Him look. That was a common problem among the Jews.

You can see that in verse 5: "But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.)" Paul says, "I am using this as human logic. It certainly isn't divine thinking here." He is trying to anticipate what they are going through. In other words, they are saying, "Hey, if I lie and that makes God look more truthful, if I am faithless and that makes God look more faithful, if I am sinful in any area and that makes God look holier, then why would God bring judgment on me? I am doing Him a favor. We ought to sin more so that grace may abound."

Paul picks that same subject up in chapter 6. He says that is not at all what we are saying. Antinomianism said, "Hey, man, you can get saved and do what you want." They were saying, "God is a God of grace. Go ahead and do what you want to do. If you sin more, grace will more abound. I mean, the more you sin, the better you are making God look." That is what Paul was anticipating some of them were saying. You see, when you are not going to be led to repentance, you are going to do something. You will take the Word and make it mean what you want it to mean, and you will take the Word and let it give you a license to sin. You think God's grace in your life means you can just do whatever you want to do.

How are you living right now? God's Word says there is no way you can live unrighteously and claim to know Him. How can you ever justify that? Anytime you justify something with the Word of God you are doing exactly what the Jews did. They had that group which had been affected by Antinomianism. Paul expected that. Not only that, they even accused him of doing that. You can turn it around the other way. Some of those pious Pharisees had developed their own standard.

In verses 7-8 he reiterates: "But if through my life the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), 'Let us do evil that good may come'?" Some people said that was what Paul was preaching. Now that is the other side of the picture. You had some who believed that way

themselves and others who were condemning him because they said the message of grace is license. They didn't like it when they found out the Gentiles could be saved and not be circumcised. So they turned on the very man God was using and tried to make him look like he was preaching license when all he was doing was preaching the message of grace.

Is it an advantage to you to be a Baptist, or a Presbyterian, or a Methodist? Has it lead you to repentance and a total transformed life by that which you know? If it hasn't, it hasn't done you a bit of good. You need a lifestyle of His righteousness. Now when I say "righteousness," I am talking about what He does out of our obedience. If that is not in your life, a willingness to obey and surrender to His Word, then I wouldn't give you anything for your salvation experience. Salvation produces a lifestyle and we are going to be judged, not by what we have told people we have but by the way we live.

That is the whole message Paul is sending to the Jews. The way you are living is not going to measure to your standard. It has got to measure to God's standard.