

Salvation by Faith Alone: The Book of Romans

The Human Condition

Lesson #3 for October 21, 2017

Scriptures: Romans 1:16-17,22-32; 2:1-10,17-23; 3:1-2,10-18,23.

1. The focus of this lesson is on the sinfulness of human beings as presented in Romans 1:1-3:23. Two main types of sinners are described and discussed. The Gentiles, or pagans, had done almost everything they could to exclude God from their lives. The results as presented in Romans 1:18-32 are almost unspeakable—seemingly the worst list of sins in the entire Bible.
2. The second group are former-Jews who are described as those who claimed to be righteous and, as a result, condemned the first group which they saw as terrible sinners. Because of the judgmental attitude of the former-Jews as described in Romans 2, God regarded them as being even more sinful than the Gentiles or pagans! So, are we more like the pagans or the Jews?
3. The Scriptures have always described the human condition as sinful. (Genesis 6:5-7; 1 Kings 8:46; 2 Chronicles 6:36; Psalm 5:9; 10:7; 14:1-3; 36:1; 53:1-3; Isaiah 59:2,7-8; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:10-23; 1 John 1:8,10)

The expression “all are under sin” must be taken in a spiritual sense; that is to say, not as men appear in their own eyes or in those of others, but as they stand before God. They are all under sin, those who are manifest transgressors in the eyes of men, as well as those who appear righteous in their own sight and before others. Those who perform outwardly good works do them from fear of punishment or love of gain and glory, or otherwise from pleasure in a certain object, but not from a willing and ready mind. In this way man exercises himself continually in good works outwardly, but inwardly he is totally immersed in sinful desires and evil lusts, which are opposed to good works.—Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans** 69.

4. Ellen G. White described this condition as follows:

Let no one take the limited, narrow position that any of the works of man can help in the least possible way to liquidate the debt of his transgression. This is a fatal deception. If you would understand it, you must cease haggling over your pet ideas, and with humble hearts survey the atonement.

This matter is so dimly comprehended that thousands upon thousands claiming to be sons of God are children of the wicked one, because they will depend on their own works. God always demanded good works, the law demands it, but because man placed himself in sin where his good works were valueless, Jesus’ righteousness alone can avail. Christ is able to save to the uttermost because He ever liveth to make intercession for us. [Romans 8:34]—Ellen G. White comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*,* vol. 6, 1071.4-5; *1SM** 343.3. Compare *OHC** 122.2. [Bold type and content in brackets are added.]

5. But, God has not left us in a hopeless condition. After 15 verses of introduction in Romans 1, Paul went immediately to his main subject—the gospel.

Romans 1:16-17:¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."—*The Revised Standard Version*.^{*} (1971). (Romans 1:16–17). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

6. Are we—like Paul—proud of the gospel? Or, are we—like Jonah—embarrassed by it? (See Jonah 4.)
7. Few verses have resulted in more variations of opinion in translation than have these verses. Three key words are very important in our understanding of this passage.
 - 1) *Gospel*. The word *gospel* is a translation of the Greek word *euangellion* which means good news. If something is not good news, it cannot be described as gospel. We are all inherently hopelessly sinners; so, the "good news" cannot be primarily about us!
 - 2) *Righteousness*. Since man is described as wholly sinful, he has no righteousness of his own. Thus, we are left with two other possibilities:
 - a) This righteousness is a righteousness from God which is legally transferred to our account through a process called justification. This was the view of Martin Luther. Or,
 - b) It is God's own righteousness; and that is the clear meaning of the simple reading of Romans 1:16-17. But, who would dare to question God's righteousness? Satan did! In heaven! Martin Luther did not understand the implications of that.
 - 3) *Faith*. The Greek word *pistis* is variously translated in the New Testament as *faith*, *belief*, *confidence*, or *trust*. What does God need to do to restore a trusting relationship with His children? Can God be trusted? How can we be sure? Taste and see!
8. But, very few of God's children have comprehended this "great controversy" over God's character and government. Martin Luther, reading Romans 1:16-17, said:

This righteousness, however, is not that according to which God Himself is righteous as God, but that by which we are justified by Him through faith and the Gospel. It is called the righteousness of God in contradistinction to man's righteousness which comes from works.—Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*^{*} 41.

Does man have any righteousness of his own?

9. So, why do some of us think this verse should read just as it says simply—that "God's righteousness needs to be revealed"? **When and where did the sin problem arise?** If you turn first to Genesis 3 describing Adam and Eve's transgression in the garden, then it seems that the sin problem is one that primarily affects human beings, and the solution will be God's way of setting us right again.
10. By contrast, if you take all of Scripture and begin with the earliest historical event mentioned in Scripture, (Revelation 12:7-12) you will recognize that sin began in heaven in the throne room of God before human beings had been created. Lucifer, the highest created being, became jealous of God's power and creative ability and, thus, started a rebellion against God, hoping to force God to share those powers with Lucifer and the other angels. He wanted to rise to be equal to, or even superior to, God Himself! (Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28) War broke

out in heaven, (Revelation 12:7) and Satan and those who chose to join with him were cast down to this earth. Thus, sin began when Satan accused God of not being fair, of being untrustworthy, and of selfishly not being willing to share His powers. God has always taken the loving, unselfish approach toward His children. He has been willing to share as much as He can of Himself. Lucifer/Satan took the selfish approach, trying to demand a higher position for himself. **Thus, the first sin began when questions and accusations were made against God and the way He runs His universe.**

11. Down through the centuries, Satan has added to his accusations against God. He first told Adam and Eve that God had lied to them about death being the result of sin and, further, that God was withholding important information from them. (Genesis 3:1-5) He wanted Adam and Eve to join him in making accusations against God. Over time, Satan has accused God of being arbitrary, exacting, vengeful, unforgiving, and severe. Just to mention a couple examples, Satan has claimed that God is just waiting to destroy His children if they have even one unconfessed sin. He has claimed that God is responsible for an ever-burning hell. In actual fact, these characteristics are descriptive of Satan himself; but, he accuses God of being like that. If God were, in fact, like that, would you want to live with Him forever? Do you believe God? Or, do you believe Satan?
12. So, what did Paul think was the essence of the gospel? Read Romans 1:18. If the essence of the gospel is how God saves you and me, why did Paul turn immediately to discussing God's wrath? Is God's wrath the first thing you think of when someone mentions the gospel—the "good news"? If the gospel is primarily about how God saves you and me, then God's wrath is a somewhat peripheral issue. **However, if the gospel is about the righteousness of God and whether or not God can be trusted, then the truth about God's wrath is actually core to our understanding.**
13. **And notice what sin it is that stirs up God's wrath!** It is not breaking one of the Ten Commandments. It is not murder or rape. **Sin is suppressing or twisting the truth about God and, thus, preventing it from being known!** That is exactly what Satan did in heaven. Do we ever misrepresent God to our children? Our colleagues? Or, our friends?
14. The *Bible Study Guide*, focusing on the sinfulness of human beings, completely skips over this description of God's wrath. However, **this is one of the most important points found in Romans 1.** So, what is God's wrath? What does God do to His enemies? If Satan is correct in his accusations against God, then God's wrath would be revealed by His torturing His enemies in everlasting flames. If God were like Satan has claimed He is, would Satan have dared to have rebelled? **But, Romans 1:24,26,28 say that God's wrath is simply His handing over sinners to reap the natural consequences of their own destructive behavior.** This idea is not new in Romans 1! It is all through the Old Testament. (See Judges 2 & 3; Hosea 11 and many other places.) Paul showed that he understood this clearly by quoting six passages from the Old Testament. See above.
15. So, what is it that God wants from us? Romans 2:4 says that God has shown His goodness and kindness to us to lead us to repentance—that is, to change our minds about Him. He does not want to have to hand us over to the consequences of our own sins. How does God feel about handing over His children to reap the consequences of their sins? Hosea 11:1-8 describe how He weeps when He must do that and how He did that to Sodom and Gomorrah!
16. After pointing out the terrible sinfulness of the Gentile pagans and also the terrible sinfulness of the judgmental Jews, Paul proceeded to Romans 3.

17. Read Romans 3:1-4.

Romans 3:1-4:¹Have the Jews then any advantage over the Gentiles? Or is there any value in being circumcised? ²Much, indeed, in every way! In the first place, God trusted his message to the Jews. ³But what if some of them were not faithful? Does this mean that God will not be faithful? Certainly not! God must be true, even though every human being is a liar. As the scripture says,

“You must be shown to be right when you speak;

you must win your case when you are being tried.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Romans 3:1-4). New York: American Bible Society.

18. If the gospel is only about how God saves you and me, these verses are puzzling. However, if, as we have suggested, sin began in the courts of heaven with accusations against God and questions about His trustworthiness, then there is every reason in the world to say that God must win His case in court—the opinions of the entire universe.
19. But, few Christians seem to be concerned at all about God’s reputation! Human beings have become so egocentric and selfish that all we can think about is what will happen to us. We do not want to admit our sinfulness. We want to earn our way to heaven. Those who take the larger, broader, deeper, wider approach to understanding the great controversy between God and Satan over the character and government of God recognize that if God cannot be trusted, then salvation would be meaningless! **So, the first issue that must be resolved is whether or not God can be trusted.**
20. Let us make no mistake. We are all sinners and desperately in need of God’s healing salvation. See Romans 3:9-18,23. It is very significant to notice that Paul was not just making all of this up; he was quoting from the Old Testament! See Psalms 14:1-3; 36:1; 53:1-3; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Isaiah 59:7-8. All of these verses are quoted from the Greek LXX [Septuagint] translation which varies in some cases from the Hebrew.
21. Have you taken a good look at yourself recently? Is there anything in your life about which you could boast before Jesus or the Father? See Jeremiah 9:23-24. The good news is always about God.
22. Early in the 20th century, it was commonly thought that man was improving and that it was just a matter of time until we would be living in a perfect world! But, the 20th century turned out to be the most violent and wicked century in history! Do Paul’s comments in Romans 1:18-32 apply to our world today?
23. We may not be as evil as we believe those pagans described in Romans 1 used to be; but, how about his comments about the former-Jewish believers recorded in Romans 2:1-3,17-24? Compare the words of Jesus Himself recorded in Matthew 7:3-5 and Luke 6:41-42. Might those words apply to us as Seventh-day Adventists?
- After the Apostle has shown that all heathen are sinners, he now, in a special and most emphatic way, shows that also the Jews live in sin, above all because they obey the Law only outwardly, that is, according to the letter and not according to the spirit.—Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans** 61.
24. Romans 2:4 tells us that God’s goodness is supposed to lead us to repentance. How does that work? God will never force us to repent.
25. Romans 2:5-11 goes on to show that good works should be the result of our salvation, never

the cause or source of our salvation.

A terrible picture of the condition of the world has been presented before me. Immorality abounds everywhere. Licentiousness is the special sin of this age. Never did vice lift its deformed head with such boldness as now. The people seem to be benumbed, and the lovers of virtue and true goodness are nearly discouraged by its boldness, strength, and prevalence. The iniquity which abounds is not merely confined to the unbeliever and the scoffer. Would that this were the case, but it is not. Many men and women who profess the religion of Christ are guilty. Even some who profess to be looking for His appearing are no more prepared for that event than Satan himself. They are not cleansing themselves from all pollution. They have so long served their lust that it is natural for their thoughts to be impure and their imaginations corrupt. It is as impossible to cause their minds to dwell upon pure and holy things as it would be to turn the course of Niagara and send its waters pouring up the falls.
—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*,* vol. 2, 346.2.

26. Another issue in understanding the book of Romans is the use of long Latin terms for the various processes involved. What is the correct meaning of *justification*? *Sanctification*? Even *salvation*? *Justification* was originally a Latin word derived from the Greek word *dikaioo*. The basic meaning of *dikaioo* is “to set right.” However, modern theologians have twisted this and turned it rather into a statement “to declare righteous or legally right” even though no actual change has taken place in the person. *Sanctification* comes from a Greek word *hagioo* which means literally “to make holy” or “to set apart for holy purposes.” The whole process of how God saves human beings is summed up by the word *salvation* which again is a Latin word which means “to heal” or “to save” someone. It comes from the Greek word *sozo* also meaning “to heal” or “to save.” To avoid these long words, see the *Good News Bible*.
27. So, once again we see the dilemma showing up. What is necessary for God to do to save human beings? Is it a legal process whereby He corrects our legal records in heaven—perhaps even erasing the evidence against us? Does the blood of Christ cover our sins in some legal way? All of that could take place without any real change happening in us. Or, by contrast, is there a process of healing whereby we are actually changed? If we are “truly saved” in the original sense of the word, we must be “fully healed.” What would it take for us to be healed? Don’t we need to understand the truth about God and His character? If we understood that truth, would it help us to take a different attitude toward Him? If trust could be restored between God and His children and if it was safe for Him to trust us and if we could learn to trust Him once again, would that solve the sin problem?
28. Is God concerned primarily about clearing up our records—about forgiving us—or about healing and restoring us and making us safe to live in His kingdom and in His glorious presence?
29. Do we have any evidence that the life and death of Jesus was necessary not only to save and heal us but also to answer questions even in the minds of the onlooking universe?
- 1 Corinthians 4:9: For it seems to me that God has given the very last place to us apostles, like people condemned to die in public **as a spectacle for the whole world of angels and of humanity**.—*The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation*.*
- Ephesians 1:7-10: ⁷For by the blood of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God, ⁸which he gave to us in such large

measure!

In all his wisdom and insight ⁹God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan he had already decided to complete by means of Christ.

¹⁰This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head.—*Ibid.**

Ephesians 3:9b-10: ^{9b}God, who is the Creator of all things, kept his secret hidden through all the past ages, ¹⁰in order that at the present time, by means of the church, **the angelic rulers and powers in the heavenly world might learn of his wisdom in all its different forms.—*Ibid.****

Colossians 1:20: Through the Son, then, God decided **to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son's blood [His sacrificial death] on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven.—*Ibid.****

1 Peter 1:12: God revealed to these prophets that their work was not for their own benefit, but for yours, as they spoke about those things which you have now heard from the messengers who announced the Good News by the power of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. **These are things which even the angels would like to understand.—*Ibid.**** [Bold type and content in brackets are added.]

Ellen White put it this way:

But the plan of redemption had a yet broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man. It was not for this alone that Christ came to the earth; it was not merely that the inhabitants of this little world might regard the law of God as it should be regarded; but **it was to vindicate the character of God before the universe.** To this result of His great sacrifice—its influence upon the intelligences of other worlds, as well as upon man—the Saviour looked forward when just before His crucifixion He said: “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto Me.” John 12:31,32. The act of Christ in dying for the salvation of man would not only make heaven accessible to men, but before all the universe **it would justify God and His Son in their dealing with the rebellion of Satan.** It would establish the perpetuity of the law of God and would reveal the nature and the results of sin. *Patriarchs and Prophets** 68,69 (1890); *Reflecting Christ** 60 (1985). [Bold type is added.]

30. In our study of Romans, we will attempt to look beyond our human dilemma to the broader higher, deeper, universe-wide controversy that has involved all of the intelligent beings in God's universe. By doing this, we can read the book of Romans just as it was intended to be read—in its simplest, straightforward meaning—and avoid stretching and straining the translation to make it fit what we want it to say. It will be an exciting journey.

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