

### *Bible Study Romans 3*

As we saw previously, the book of Romans was written to the Christian community in the city of Rome, the capital of the mighty Roman Empire, and the birthplace of an ancient tradition of Roman law. With this in mind, Paul writes the entire book of Romans as a lawyer, would present his case. There is abundant evidence that Paul was writing to an audience that was a mixture of Jewish and Gentile converts. He begins addressing the former:

*3:1 “What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.”*

When God began to re-reveal himself to humanity, he selected Abraham and his descendants to be the primary recipients of His revelation. He was extremely generous with that revelation. He gave them everything. To Moses He gave the first five books of the Bible. In Genesis He revealed to the Israelites how the Universe and humanity were created, and established His covenants with Abraham. In the book of Exodus, He explained the calling of Moses, the Hebrews’ departure from slavery in Egypt, and the 40 years of wandering in the desert.

In Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy God gave to the Jews extremely specific instructions on their religious life – the priesthood, the tabernacle/temple, the sacrifices, the fasts and festivals, the judges and then kings. In the rest the Hebrew Scriptures, God recorded a steady stream of prophets to reveal to His people His messages. All these comprise the incredibly bountiful *“the oracles of God”* to His chosen nation.

*“<sup>3</sup> For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? <sup>4</sup> Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar...”*

Paul is saying God was faithful to the Jews, even though they rarely responded with faith the obedience. The faithfulness of God continued anyway. The object of His faithfulness was cosmically expanded, with great effect, to the Gentiles and the Church. He returns to his legal argument that God’s judgement of unrepentant humanity is just. After millennia of their chronic disobedience, God’s judgement of the Jews was just.

*“<sup>5</sup> But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) <sup>6</sup> Certainly not!... <sup>8</sup> Their condemnation is just.”*

Christ mourned this epic tragedy with His errant people: *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! <sup>38</sup> See! Your house is left to you desolate...”*

*“<sup>8</sup> And why not say, “Let us do evil that good may come”?”*

John Chrysostom comments on the meaning of this verse:

*“Paul deprives those who live in wickedness of any excuse and shows that it is from the factiousness and carelessness that they fall into unrighteous... their fall is voluntary; their crime is not of necessity.”*

Today there are some fellow Christians who see no need to be deified. They believe that simply believing in Christ will save them no matter what. To them, it is important for Christians to refrain from sins, but in the end, it is not essential. They believe that God will forgive them no matter what they do. This is called the doctrine of “once saved always saved.” Here is an example:

<https://youtu.be/IH8ggLDmhqo?si=MXL0SOLABZs2GXRx>

This doctrine of “once saved always saved” used to be dominant in Protestant circles. However, it has recently come under widespread criticism and is now passing out of favor in Protestant circles.

*“J.D. Greear is the Pastor of the Summit Church in Durham, NC, and is the 62nd President of the Southern Baptist Convention. A few days ago, on Jan 29, 2020, he wrote a blog entitled ‘Beware of Complacency of ‘Once Saved, Always Saved.’*

*“Eternal security is a glorious and comforting truth. But notice what Paul says in Romans 11:20. “You will be kept if you avoid the unbelief that overcame Israel and “stand by faith.”*

*We have two seemingly contradictory truths: On the one hand, the Bible says that once God saves you, you’ll always be saved (e.g., John 10; Romans 8); on the other, it says that only if you endure to the end will you be saved (cf. Hebrews 3:12-14).*

*You have to put the two together. One of the essential marks of truly saving faith is that it endures to the end. The real doctrine of eternal security reads like this: Not only “once saved, always saved” but also “once saved, forever following.” <https://faithalone.org/blog/sbc-president-says-once-saved-always-saved-if/>*

Our Protestant friends seem to be coming closer to what Orthodoxy has always believed - that the doctrine of “once saved once saved always saved” is false. True salvation is not a mental exercise. It requires obedient action. You cannot have one without the other. Protestants usually report having a powerful experience of repentance and faith (usually called “being saved.” I believe these experiences are almost always very real.

But to Orthodox, that experience is only the starting line. We spend the rest of our lives running the rest of the race, which requires a lot of work on our part. Paul writes,

*“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.*

*Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air (1 Corinthians 9:24-26).*

What Paul calls “running the race” is a lifelong process of faith, worship, repentance, prayer, service to others, and striving to obey all the commandments of Christ. It requires several works which the Scriptures say are extremely important components of salvation. These are genuinely saving works. Christ says that salvation normally requires baptism, and that baptism requires water (John 3:5, Acts 2:37-38). At Pentecost, when the witnesses of the miracles asked Peter “what must we do?” Peter responded, “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38).

Salvation normally requires partaking of the Holy Communion, which foretold in John 6:53-55, and which He inaugurated at the Last Supper in Matthew 26:26-28. The Bible says that we still sin as Christians, and gives us Confession as the means of forgiveness of the sins we commit throughout our lives (1 John 1:8-10). Christ gave His apostles the authority to forgive those sins on earth (Matthew 18:18), and that authority has been passed down to their direct descendants, the clergy. Salvation normally requires asking and giving forgiveness (Matthew 6:14). He says bluntly that if we refuse to forgive others, our Father will not forgive us. The Bible says that actively helping those in need (Matthew 25:31-46).

Paul then adds that there is a very real and dire consequence for not running the race.

*“But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified (verse 27).”* The Greek word translated here is *ἀδόκιμος*. Strong’s concordance defines it to mean “failing to pass the test,” “unapproved,” “counterfeit.”

All these verses give us fair warning. If we willingly refuse Baptism of water, Christ says we risk not entering the Kingdom of God. Christ says if we refuse partake of Holy Communion, which He calls His flesh “indeed,” and the wine which He calls His blood “indeed,” we have no life in Him. If we reject confession, the sins we committed since our last confession might still unforgiven. If we reject asking and giving forgiveness of others, we risk not being forgiven by God. If we do nothing to help others in our lives, we risk being assigned to the goats rather than the sheep on Judgement Day. Conversely, when strive to do these biblically saving works, the Holy Spirit more and more fills us, and our sinful desires are subdued. The end of the race is our arrival to heaven.

Our Protestant friends who believe in “once saved always saved” often quote the writings of Paul in support of this belief. In this verse, Paul himself disavows any association of those who say *“<sup>8</sup>And why not say, “Let us do evil that good may come”?* He calls such talk “slander:”

*—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say.”*

Paul returns to his previous statement that all humanity is born with sin:

***“<sup>9</sup> What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.”***

***“<sup>10</sup> As it is written:***

***“There is none righteous, no, not one;***

***<sup>11</sup> There is none who understands;***

***There is none who seeks after God.***

***<sup>12</sup> They have all turned aside;***

***They have together become unprofitable;***

***There is none who does good, no, not one.”***

***<sup>13</sup> “Their throat is an open tomb;***

***With their tongues they have practiced deceit”;***

***“The poison of asps is under their lips”;***

***<sup>14</sup> “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.”***

***<sup>15</sup> “Their feet are swift to shed blood;***

***<sup>16</sup> Destruction and misery are in their ways;***

***<sup>17</sup> And the way of peace they have not known.”***

***<sup>18</sup> “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”***

**Both Western and Eastern Christians believe in what is often called “original sin,” but what they mean by original sin is somewhat different. From these verses in Romans, Western theology has tended to take passages like this, and concluded that all humans are born universally and completely evil. The West tends to have a very negative view of humanity. The Western attitude began with Augustine, a giant in Western Theology from the 4<sup>th</sup> century.**

***“Now all men are a mass of sin, since, as the apostle says, ‘In Adam all die’ (I Cor. 15:22), and to Adam the entire human race traces the origin of its sin against God. Sinful humanity must pay a debt of punishment to the supreme divine justice.... He decides who are not to be offered mercy by a standard of equity which is most secret and far removed from human powers of understanding.... He justly finds fault with sinners because he does not compel them to sin.... But carnal concupiscence now reigns as a result of the penalty of sin, (Augustine, Letter to Simplician).***

**Augustine, and most of Western theology after him, sees original sin in judicial terms (“pay a debt of punishment to the supreme divine justice” and “penalty of sin”). There is also a strong element of inheritance of Adam and Eve’s sin through sexual transmission. And a major part of the transmitted inheritance from them is personal guilt. To Augustine, we are all born guilty of Adam and Eve’s sin. That personal guilt is so severe that he believed that unbaptized infants go to hell.**

***“St. Augustine and the African Fathers believed that unbaptized infants share in the common positive misery of the damned (i.e., hell), and the very most that St. Augustine concedes is that their punishment is the mildest of all” (Catholic Encyclopedia).***

Another key component of the Augustinian view of original sin is the concept of universal guilt. Augustine continues, *“and has thrown the whole human race into confusion, making of it one lump in which the original guilt [originali reatu] remains throughout.”*

The Protestant Reformers retained this Augustinian view about fallen humanity - sin as a judicial infraction, extreme in its effects on humans, and includes inherited guilt. The reformer John Calvin used the term “Total Depravity” to describe fallen humanity. It was one of the five pillars of his theology.

If the above quote from Romans 3:9-18 (*“There is none who does good, no, not one”*) was the only statement on the Bible about original sin, then the Western Augustinian view would be justified. But there are other Scriptural passages that give a balancing context.

Orthodoxy also believes in original sin, but with some very big differences from the West. We sometimes use the term “ancestral sin” to signify the difference. Eastern belief in original sin agrees with the West on several key points.

We agree with the West that Adam and Eve’s sin brought immediate consequences upon them: estrangement from God (“Where are you?”) estrangement from each other (shame at their nakedness, “this woman that you gave me...), the adversities of labor (“sweat of your brow”), pain in childbirth, a distorted nature (“thorns and thistles”), and expulsion from Paradise.

We agree with the West that all humanity must now live in the fallen world that Adam and Eve left us. We are all born in a state of estrangement from God, estrangement from each other, struggle at our labors, have pain in childbearing, struggle with a distorted nature, and imagine a perfect world that we can never attain on our own.

We agree with the West that all humans have free will to obey and disobey God, just like Adam and Eve. And like them we all eventually use that free will to disobey God. When we do, we reinforce the cycle of fall over and over, doomed to a bleak existence of estrangement, struggle, frustration, and despair. What a sad condition for a species that God originally created to love, be loved by, in Paradise.

We agree with the West that on our own, we can never escape that cycle. Humanity is totally dependent on God to rescue us from our fallen situation. We cannot move towards God unless He first moves towards us. He did this in Christ. As this chapter says,

*“<sup>23</sup>...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, <sup>26</sup> to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”*

The Orthodox view differs from the Augustinian view in several ways. First, the Orthodox view of fallen humanity is not as severe as that of the West. Bishop Kallistos Ware writes:

*“Orthodox religious thought lays the utmost emphasis on the image of God in man...*

*Because he is an icon of God, each member of the human race, even the most sinful, is infinitely precious in God’s sight. ‘When you see your brother,’ said Clement of Alexandria (died 215), ‘you see God.’ And Evagrius taught: ‘After God, we must count all men as God Himself.’ This respect for every human being is visibly expressed in Orthodox worship, when the priest censes not only the icons but the members of the congregation, saluting the image of God in each person. ‘The best icon of God is man” (The Orthodox Church).*

We have seen that in the West, salvation is mostly a judicial proceeding. We meet God in a courtroom. The Father is the judge, who reads all the legal charges against us, and all the legal punishments that follow. We are about to be sentenced to hell. But Christ, our Advocate, pleads with His Father, reminding Him that the sentence has already been carried out on Him. The divine justice has been served. The Father agrees, and the accused is freed.

The Orthodox East does not disagree with this Western paradigm, but the dominant Eastern paradigm of salvation is not judicial, but therapeutic. If humanity is saved in a courtroom in the West, he is saved in a hospital in the East. In Orthodoxy, original sin is seen as a disease, not as a list of legal charges. That disease causes us to disobey God, become physically and spiritually ill, and eventually to die. In Orthodoxy, we are saved by being healed, and Christ is the Great Physician. (Our Western friends do not disagree with this either.) This was prophesied in the Old Testament:

*“Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; Save me, and I shall be saved, For You are my praise” (Jeremiah 17:14)*

*“Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies” (Psalm 103:2-4).*

*“But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).*

*“Jesus answered and said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Luke 5:31-32)*

The greatest difference between the Eastern and Western view of original sin is the idea of original guilt. As we have seen, Augustine believed that all humans are born in a guilty state. He called it “original guilt [originali reatu].” Orthodoxy roundly rejects original guilt in original sin. When we are born, we have original sin, but that does not mean we are guilty of the sins of our ancestors. It does mean we will eventually exercise our free will to commit our own sins. Only then do we become guilty of anything.

**In short, Orthodoxy believes we are born with the destructive results of Adam and Eve's sin, but we are not guilty of Adam and Eve's sin. We are like crack babies. When infants are born to addicted mothers, they born with the tragic results of their mothers' actions, but they are not guilty of their mothers' actions.**