

Sabbath School Today **With the 1888 Message Dynamic**

Salvation by Faith Alone: The Book of Romans **Lesson 2: The Controversy**

“The Jews therefore said to one another, ‘Where does this man intend to go that we shall not find Him? He is not intending to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks, is He?’” (John 7:35).

The Jewish people had become so exclusive that it was beyond their comprehension that someone would preach to anyone but Jews. The reference to the “Dispersion” suggests they were even limiting the outreach only to Jews scattered among the Greeks. The implication is that they considered salvation impossible for anyone but a Jew, therefore outreach was unnecessary. Paul’s evangelistic efforts among the Gentiles must have made some of the Jewish Christians uneasy.

If someone was a Jew, everybody knew it by their dress, customs and diet. The Gentiles did not have these cultural customs, making it difficult to tell who belonged and who did not. Any time a group believes it important to distinguish members from nonmembers, rules are necessary. There was freedom in this new Christianity, and the council at Jerusalem concluded that only minimal restrictions would be placed on the new converts (see Acts 15:20). For centuries, the Jews believed that if you kept all the rules correctly, heaven was yours. For the new Christians to side step all that effort was less than well received by many former Jews with old prejudices.

Paul addresses these prejudices at the beginning of his epistle to the Roman Christians by rehearsing the shortcomings of both Jews and Gentiles, concluding, “There is none righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10). The Galatian heresy that God saves only the circumcised had just recently consumed the time and energy of the leadership.

Probably the best setting in which to understand this Jewish prejudice is to look at how they had come to understand God’s covenant promises to Israel. The Jews invariably described that God’s promises were made to their father Abraham. Indeed they were, but that was not the first time the promise of a Savior was made.

“The covenant of grace was first made with man in Eden, when after the Fall there was given a divine promise that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent’s head. ... This same covenant was renewed to Abraham in the promise, ‘In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.’ ... Though this covenant was made with Adam and renewed to Abraham, it could not be ratified until the death of Christ. ... yet when ratified by Christ, it is called a *new* covenant.” [1]

If the promises to Adam and Abraham were the same, the Jews had no basis for believing it was virtually impossible for a Gentile to be saved. But another covenant, formed at Sinai might have been misleading. Why was another covenant formed at Sinai? "In their bondage the people had to a great extent lost the knowledge of God ... Living in the midst of idolatry and corruption, they had no true conception of the holiness of God, of the exceeding sinfulness of their own hearts, their utter inability, in themselves, to render obedience to God's law, and their need of a Saviour. All this they must be taught." [2] Israel demonstrated the truth of this statement when they naively responded at Sinai that they would do everything God had said (Ex. 19:8). They had to be taught they were incapable of doing what they promised.

None of this, including their dismal failure with the golden calf, surprised an omniscient God. Thus began an extended journey with cycles of Israel trying to keep the law, giving up, sliding into idolatry, then starting over with a new generation. When the Messiah fulfilled God's "New" Covenant promises, they were too immersed in their Old Covenant works to recognize Him.

The New Covenant truth was an essential element of the 1888 message, and even today lifts a load of doubt and despair from many heavy hearts. The 1888 message clarified the difference between the two covenants: The New Covenant is God's one-way promise to write His law in our hearts, and to give us (not offer us) everlasting salvation as a free gift "in Christ." The Old Covenant is the vain promise of the people to obey, and "gives birth to bondage."

E. J. Waggoner saw this difference: "But this [God's promises to Abraham] was not such a covenant as was made with the Israelites at Horeb. That one contained no reference to Christ, and no provision for the forgiveness of sins; the one with Abraham was confirmed 'in Christ' (Gal. 3:17) and was made not on condition that he should be righteous by his own unaided efforts, but was made on condition of his having the righteousness of faith. Compare Rom. 4:11 with 3:22-25." [3]

And in his *The Glad Tidings* Waggoner wrote: "The covenant and promise of God are one and the same. ... God's covenants with men can be nothing else than promises to them. ... God promises us everything that we need, and more than we can ask or think, as a gift. We give Him ourselves, that is nothing. And He gives us Himself, that is, everything." [4]

The Jews had come to view the ceremonial law and the moral law as one single entity, with all elements binding on those who would enter heaven. Many Christians see the two laws the same way, but nail the entire thing to the cross, saying nothing of the law is now binding. The leadership at the 1888 General Conference took the position that only the moral law, not the ceremonial is binding. This seems the compromise position, but it can be understood differently.

Something that is binding can be used to punish for violation and rewarded for compliance. If two parties agree to enter into a contract, each has the right to enforce

performance by the other. But, even courts recognize that if one of the parties to the contract does not have the capacity to perform what they have promised, there was never a sufficient meeting of the minds to say a mutually binding contract was formed.

In order to save us, God had to do everything. Waggoner understood that through grace, God gives mankind the righteousness of Jesus Who alone has lived a sinless life. By faith the believer accepts this righteousness, making the believer, in Christ, a doer of the law. It is important to understand that this righteousness is not added because the justification obtained by Christ at the cross needs bolstering to entitle the human race to heaven. When Christ proclaimed, "It is finished," He did not mean it was finished except for the process of sanctification which will make us righteous.

He saw it this way: "The meaning of the word 'justified' is 'made righteous.' The Latin word for righteousness is *justitia*. To be just is to be righteous. Then we add the termination *fy*, from the Latin word, meaning 'to make,' and we have the exact equivalent of the simpler term, 'make righteous.'" [5]

God provided a Savior Who became our sin for us and paid the penalty for it, the second death. Then, through the accepted gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, He changes our hearts, which are at enmity against the law to love it. Here is where Waggoner saw that the Old and New Covenants were two separate experiences that ran on two parallel tracks from the time of Cain and Abel until the mark of the beast and seal of God as spoken of in the Book of Revelation. The law cares nothing about the state of your heart, but the New Covenant of grace changes your heart of stone to that of God's *agape* love.

—Arlene Hill

Endnotes:

[1] Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 370, 371.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 371.

[3] Ellet J. Waggoner, "Comments on Galatians 3, No. 2," *Signs of the Times*, Vol. 12, No. 27, July 15, 1886.

[4] Ellet J. Waggoner, *The Glad Tidings*, a verse-by-verse study of Galatians, p. 71, CFI ed. (2016).

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Notes:

Bible texts are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

Pastor Paul Penno's video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

<https://youtu.be/EhlcR-F1Uq4>

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