

The Bible (Unmuted) Transcript
Episode 16
Romans Part 6 (Romans 2:17-29)
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Episode Summary:

In this episode, Matt continues the journey through Romans 2, this time addressing vv. 17-29. The discussion centers around Israel's calling to be a light to the nations and how, due to her sin, Israel has not fulfilled this God-given mission. In fact, according to Paul, not only has Israel not glorified God's name among the nations, but her sin (and exile) has caused God's name to be dishonored among the nations -- despite the fact that Israel has boasted in Torah, believing it to be the source of truth and wisdom. Given that Israel is called to be a blessing, bringing the nations back to God (Genesis 12:1-3), Paul envisions a scenario in which this does happen -- though in a way that does not include performing works of the Torah (e.g., circumcision of the flesh). Paul's vision is, perhaps, controversial: covenant membership is about circumcision of the heart. And yet, Matt shows how this idea is not novel to Paul, for the Torah and the Prophets testify to this truth. In this episode, listeners get a glimpse of Paul's Messiah-centered, yet Torah-immersed, vision of what it means to be a covenant member of the family of God.

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Transcript:

0:00 Hey everybody! Welcome back to another episode of The Bible Unmuted. Today we continue our journey through the book of Romans chapter 2, specifically verses 17-29. This is the last half of Romans 2, so if you haven't listened to the previous episode where we tackle verses 1 – 16, definitely click pause on this one and go back and listen to that one first because it sets the tone, the trajectory, and the theology, really, of this entire section of scripture. So, this part won't make a lot of sense if you haven't listened to the first part. So go back and check that out and then come back and listen to this episode. As I've said before, Romans chapter 2 is foundational for understanding the entirety of Romans, I believe. And I suppose that's why Paul put it at the very beginning of his letter. He wants us to understand some foundational issues before he gets into other issues down the road. Specifically issues like election in Romans 9, 10, & 11, and the questions of Israel's covenant status in chapters 9-11. So there is a lot going on here, and I think Romans 2 helps provide the framework, the categories, and the concepts for how to think through those important texts later on. So, I'm really excited about this passage and finishing up chapter 2 today.

I want to mention as I did last week, that my new book *The End of the World as You Know It* is now available for preorder. You can preorder on Amazon or through Lexham Press. The thing is, if you preorder through Lexham Press, you get 32% off. So if you are planning on buying the book, it's really a great deal. So go to LexhamPress.com and type in either my name or the name of the book. It will take you to it and you get 32% off, so it's a pretty good deal. I am super, super grateful for that. I spent a lot of work on writing this book. I wanted this book to be for a general audience. It's not for scholars. My goal would be that you could take this book and put it in the hands of anybody in the church and say, 'hey, here's some thoughts on eschatology.' Now, one thing I've noticed about eschatology and popular level discussions on eschatology within the evangelical broadly speaking church, is that it's filled with fear. And that is something I push back against in this book. Revelation was written to bring peace to God's people, so why are we turning it into a text of fear? There are numerous other topics I tackle, not just Revelation. My way of writing the book is that I want to bring hope to people. So anyway, I pray that it actually does that very thing. And I pray that it's a beneficial resource, a tool for your toolshed as you go studying eschatology. I just wanted to throw that out there because eschatology is very important to me, and it's important to a lot of people, and I just don't like it when it gets wrapped up into fear and what not. And reach out to me if you have any questions. I am just super excited that this book is finally getting off into the wild. It doesn't ship until February 2024, but it is available today for preorder. Preorders really help get the word out, so if you do plan on buying the book, do me a favor and go ahead and preorder the book. Share it with your friends, share it on social media, and tell everybody about it if you think they would be interested in a book on eschatology.

Well, let's get into Romans Chapter 2:17-29.

4:00 Let me read started at verse 17. I'm going to read the whole section, verses 17-29 to set the context. Paul says,

17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God **18** and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, **19** and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, **20** a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, **21** you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? **22** You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? **23** You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? **24** For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." **25** Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. **26** So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? **27** Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. **28** For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. **29** Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

So this is Romans 2:17-29 and I am reading from the New Revised Standard Version. Let's take this passage and analyze it bit by bit.

5:50 We have to remember that the main point, the overarching point that Paul is trying to get across is to remind his readers that being born under the Torah as a Jew does not guarantee a righteous covenant status before God. What mattered was not that one possessed the law *naturally*, but rather that one kept the precepts of the law. Doing Torah, doing the law; not merely having the law is what mattered. And like I said last time is that one keeps and fulfills the Torah by committing their lives to Jesus the Messiah.

That is by reorganizing their allegiances around Jesus the Messiah, people can be counted as true covenant keepers. The reason is because Jesus is the true Israel. He is the true Son of God who is truly holy. In Exodus 4:23 Israel is described as God's son. But even as God's son, the people did not embody the heart and the holiness of YHWH. But Jesus, as the divine Son, did embody perfectly the heart and holiness such that God could look upon Him and say, 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.' And this means that just because you are a part of the family of physical Israel doesn't guarantee that you are truly in covenant with God, that you truly please God. You might be part of the chosen family, united *naturally* as a Jew to the family of Abraham, but that doesn't mean that you are necessarily in covenant with God. What matters is whether or not you are united to the true Son of God in whom the Father is well pleased. If you're united to Him, to Jesus, then you are in covenant with God.

But the problem is that in the first century the biggest controversy was how a person was to be marked out as a covenant member. Many Jews, known as the Judaizers, insisted that everyone had to keep the symbols of the covenant, things like circumcision. Circumcision, they said would show you to be in the covenant. It would show you to be in relation to God, to be righteous. In questions such as these had huge ramifications for everyday church fellowship. For example, if a Jewish Christian thought that their Gentile brothers and sisters had to keep the dietary laws, and that Gentile male Christians had to be circumcised, then the Jews could not in good conscience fellowship with them if they weren't circumcised or if they didn't keep kosher laws. They couldn't partake in the Eucharist with each other, for example. They would have to separate from them. And this obviously would have created all sorts of chaos for the early church. And it did. Go read Galatians for example. There is good evidence to suggest that the church at Rome would have been a mixed church consisting of both Jews and Gentile Christians. So these questions are very relevant. Many Jews believed that circumcision was required for full obedience to God for holiness and the like. But in Romans 2 Paul wants to show that this is not necessarily the case - that circumcision is not required. Paul would agree that a person had to be circumcised to be marked out as a covenant member, but the question is what *kind* of circumcision. For Paul, a circumcision of the heart is what mattered. A physical circumcision didn't matter. And what Paul is saying in Romans 2 is *that*. That very thing.

9:22 Let's circle around back to the beginning of that text. I'm going to go back read the whole thing again but in chunks and parts. We'll see how Paul makes his argument. Let's read again verses 17-23.

17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God **18** and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, **19** and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, **20** a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, **21** you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? **22** You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? **23** You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

So, let's talk a little bit about the vocation of Israel. In this text we just read how some Jews thought that they were guides to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, and so forth. I think Paul is correct. He really does capture the way the Jews understood their calling, their vocation.

Before we keep going in this text, I need to say a thing or two about Israel's vocation because I think this gets missed in discussion in Romans, especially in Romans chapter 2. So what was Israel's vocation? Again, Israel is elected by God to do something. I'm not sure if I have mentioned this before. But even if I have, it's worth repeating and thinking through. I want to talk about Israel's election, and you have to go

back to Genesis chapter 12 to see that. Now in Genesis 11 & 12, there is something very important that happens in those two chapters. Now scholars often talk about Genesis being divided up into two sections. Genesis 1 - 11 is one section and it talks about universal history, or human history. It's just all of us and the beginnings of humans. It's just universal history. In Genesis 12 - 50, the focus is not just on humans in general, its upon one family in particular – and this is the family of Abraham. If you read Genesis 1 – 11 you will notice a huge switch in focus starting in chapter 12 where God calls Abraham. And from then on, the focus is on Abraham's family; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, and all those people. And this section, the second half of Genesis, Genesis 12 – 50 is called the patriarchal history, or Jewish history. So, you have these two sections of Genesis that are divided up with universal history and Jewish history.

Now, we need to focus in Genesis 11 – 12, specifically on Genesis 12 because that's where God calls Abraham. He *elects* Abraham, chooses Abraham and Abraham's family to do something. And if you read Genesis 12:1-3, you see all that entails. So God calls Abraham to follow Him and if Abraham follows Him, then he and his family will be blessed, and he will be a *blessing* to the nations. To all the families of the earth. So there are two things there. Abraham is promised that his family will be blessed, that's the first thing. And the second thing is that he will be a *blessing* to all the families of the earth.

Now you have to ask yourself, why do all the nations of the earth need to be blessed? Well, that only makes sense...the answer is found, in Genesis chapter 11. What happened in Genesis chapter 11? The Tower of Babel. This is where all the nations are essentially cursed. All the peoples are cursed into nations. Different nations. You know the story of Babel. I won't go into all the details of what all that entails, but essentially humans are wanting to make a name for themselves. That's what we read in chapter 11. They want to make a name for themselves, they build a tower, some sort of portal to the heavens...Temples back then were generally built on high places because that's where the gods were. So this was considered an act of hubris. An act of arrogance. The people thought they could get to God and build this portal (I call it a portal because that's essentially what temples were back then) between the heavens and the earth. So anyway, they were doing this and it *did not* please God because they were doing this on their own terms, out of their own arrogance, for the sake of *their* own name. So God, He puts a curse on them essentially. He divides them up and He confuses their language. And what happens when you take a bunch of people and you break down their communication and they cannot talk to each other? Well, you have problems in those relations. It's like marriage. You can track down a lot of problems when you....when you see it as like....let me back up. Most relationships whether its marriage or anything, can be traced down to problems in communication. And this is what happens in the Tower of Babel. People are divided, people are broken. Humanity is fractured and war is easily come by after this point because humans are no longer one as God intended for us to be But because humans wanted to be one on their own terms, God placed a curse on them.

15:26 So humanity is fractured and broken and messed up. And that happens in chapter 11. So the very next thing that happens in chapter 12, is what? God calls Abraham to go and bless the nations. He calls the family of Abraham to be a blessing to the nations. And this is an important point, I think, because it captures the heart of election. That God has elected Israel for a job. Now you and I tend to think, if you are familiar with modern debates about Arminianism and Calvinism, we tend to think of election merely soteriologically. Or in terms of the doctrine of salvation. But actually, I think we should think of it in terms of the doctrine of vocation. And this is something that scholars have talked about a lot – that Abraham's family was elected for a job, for a vocation. And that was what? ...To be a blessing to the non-elect. To bring them in. To restore them back to what God's original design was. And so this is the job of Abraham's family. This is the job of Israel. To be a light to the nations. And Israel is....they take that vocation, and that is their calling and they see themselves as doing that...as being that. As being a light to those who are in darkness. As being guides to the blind, instructors to the foolish, and so forth. And this is how Jews thought of their vocation. They thought that in the Torah they had the embodiment of wisdom. You see

this in the *Wisdom of Solomon*, the apocryphal text I mentioned before. You see this here in Romans 2. So this is just how the Jews thought of their calling and of their commission.

I think we need to come back to that, because here when Paul is talking about the Jew here, he says, *'if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God'*, he is not talking about Jews in terms of their legalism per say. I don't think Paul would disagree here with the Jew who thought that as a Jew they should be a light to those who are in darkness. I don't think he disagreed here with the Jew who thought they should be a guide to the blind, a corrector to the foolish, a teacher of children. I don't think Paul disagreed with Jews when they thought that they had in the Torah the embodiment of knowledge and truth. I think Paul agrees with all of that here. He's not accusing the Jews of being haughty or being arrogant in thinking that. No! Because I think Paul knew the Jewish story quite well. I think the problem here, is that Paul is saying that they have not lived up to the standard. Now he is a Jew too, so he would say, *'We did not live up to that standard. Yeah, we had the embodiment of knowledge and truth in Torah, but did we actually listen to Torah? Or have we been convicted by Torah? Yeah, we're supposed to be a light to those who are in darkness, but my goodness, our nation has been in darkness. We've been in exile for a long time. We were called to be guides to the blind and instructors in the law, but my goodness, we find ourselves to be very blind.'* And I think Paul is going after here. He is saying that *'we boast in the law, but dishonor God by breaking the law.'* And so what Paul is doing, is finding a kink in the armor. He is finding a kink in the armor, as it were, in the Jew who claims that relying on the law will show them to be a covenant member. It's as if Paul is saying, *'Okay, look. If you think that the Torah really is a light to the world, and if you really think that you are the God given guide to the nations, then let's talk about how that's worked out. Have you ever broken the commandments? Have you actually been a guide to the nations? Or have you been a reproach to the nations?'*

Again, Paul is not denying that the Torah is the truth of God. Paul isn't denying that Israel is called to be a guide to the blind. All of that is true for Paul because he is a good Jew. He knows the stories. The problem is not that Jews are mistaken about those things. The problem is that the Jews are sinful. And that the Torah, for whatever reason, wasn't able to sanctify them completely so that they could fulfill their calling, and lead the nations back, and be a guide to the blind, and teachers of the foolish and so forth. As scholars often point out, Paul is not trying to say that every Jew has committed theft, or adultery, and the list that he's listed out in that section we read, He's only talking about the nation as a whole because, at times, in their history they have fallen into such things. And when they have, their sin was such that it would come back time and again to haunt them. And eventually would destroy them and send them into exile, and hence they would lose their kingdom. And as a result of that they would lose their witness to the world, a witness of which they were supposed to guard. A witness that was part and parcel of their calling. And yet their sin has really, at the end of the day, has kept them from fulfilling that calling.

20:42 So, Paul is reminding the Torah observant Jew that sadly and for whatever reason, Torah never kept them holy. Not enough to at least to cause them to fulfill the vocation that they were elected for. The job was to rescue the nations. Israel is God's rescue plan for the nations and here Israel needs to be rescued themselves. One of the great points N.T. Wright talks about in many of his books. And Paul is actually going to say more about this in Chapter 7 when he talks the Torah further. He's going to talk about the relationship between Torah and the Jews and their sins and so forth. And there he's going to say that the problem isn't Torah per say, the problem is ultimately that Israel is sinful. All Torah ever did for them was increase and reveal their sinfulness. See, Torah couldn't keep them sin. All it did was convict them of their sin.

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22:55 Okay, now let's look at verses 23-24.

23 You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? **24** For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

So here Paul quotes from Isaiah 52:5. And Paul's point is to show that Israel due to her exile, brings shame upon God's name. The problem is especially acute given that Israel is called to be a light to the nations. Instead of bringing the nations closer to God, they are dishonoring the name of God among the nations. In other words, Israel has not been faithful to their vocation. And so again, it's worth repeating Paul is not merely pointing out that Israel is sinful, as if his fellow Jews would find this to be shocking news. Generally speaking, Jews knew they were sinful. That's why they were cast into exile. Paul isn't trying to get the self-righteous, legalistic Jew to realize (for the first time) that they are sinful and need to run to God for grace. Yeah it's true that Jews and Gentiles all need grace because they are all sinful. But that doesn't really capture Paul's point here, at least not totally. If Paul's point here was to simply show Jews that they are sinful and as a result they need to turn to Christ, I suspect not that many Jews would find that argument convincing. Why not? Well, because first, Jew already knew they were sinful. And secondly, the Torah already anticipated failure and sin which is why it prescribe a thorough sacrificial system. So when Jews would hear Paul say, *'Hey you guys, you are sinful, therefor turn to Christ.'* They would've responded with, *'Okay, we know we've been sinful. And we know we've been unclean, but the answer to the problem is to simply run back to Torah.'* That's what they would've said if this is what Paul's argument was.

My point is to say that Paul's argument here is not just that. It's much more complex than that. It doesn't capture Paul's argument. He is not, again, trying to convince Jews of their sin, per say. They know they are sinful. He's not merely trying to say that because Jews are sinful, they need forgiveness of Jesus. I mean, that's part of it, but that isn't the totality of his argument. Paul's point is to show Jews that despite their trust in the Torah, they have not actually been faithful to the original Abrahamic mission of being a light to the nations. They haven't made God's name great. They have brought dishonor and shame to God's name. That's the point that Paul is making. Yes, yes, they need forgiveness of sins. Yes, they need pardon from their sins, but those things are always in service to the main thing. And the main thing is being a light to the world. We can put it this way, Paul is not so much trying to convince Jews they are sinful. That's not controversial to a Jew. Instead, we should think that Paul is agreeing with them that they are sinful. And because of that, they have not lived up to their calling to bring Gentiles back to God.

25:55 And here's Paul's larger point. He wants to show that the way that the covenant with Abraham has been kept, the way Gentiles are coming back to God, the way the light is shining in darkness, is through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. So think again of Romans chapter 1 verse 5 – one of the very first verses we looked at in our series through Romans. Paul says his job as an apostle of Jesus Christ is to bring about the obedience of the faith among the nations. And so Paul sees this gospel of Jesus Christ as being the thing that brings the nations back. As being the light that shines in the darkness. As being the guide to the blind. It's the gospel. Torah couldn't do that because all Torah did was point out sin, not do away with it. And so Paul's point is, *'Guys, you have trusted in Torah. You boast in the Torah, but it hasn't helped you succeed in your mission. It hasn't helped you accomplish the vocation in getting the Gentiles back. In fact, God's name is dishonored among you, among the Gentiles. It's not glorified among you, among the Gentiles. Why? Because of your sin. It's brought shame to the situation, not honor.'*

And in light of that, think of Romans 1:16-17. Paul says, *'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. For it is the power God to bring salvation to all who believe. To the Jew first, and also to the Greek.'* Now again, he is saying it is the gospel of God that reverses the shameful situation that people find themselves in. Specifically, he is thinking of Jews. He is thinking collectively not just individually. I think I mentioned that in the episode where I talked about Romans 1:16-17. That shame there is more along the lines of collective shame, not individual embarrassment per say. Although that might be included there, that is

not Paul's point. Paul is a good Jew. He thinks collectively. Today we as Christians in the west, prize ourselves in our personal relationship with Jesus. It's me and Jesus. Just kind of a rugged individualism. And don't get me wrong, I totally think you need to have a personal relationship with Jesus, but that doesn't capture Christianity. Christianity is not me and Jesus, it's us and Jesus. It's the church. It's the people of God, the Kingdom. It's a collective aspect to all of this. Not in the sense that it does away with individualism. We're not doing away with the individual or anything of the sort. But there has to be a balance. And Paul is saying that shame is not a thing for those who believe in the gospel. That gospel people are not put to shame, but we are vindicated in the end. We are "*righteoused*" We are justified.

28:40 Think again of Romans 3:21-22. We haven't gotten there yet, but I'm sure you know the text. This is the text that talks about how the righteousness of God has been revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And so what Paul is saying is that God's faithfulness, God's righteousness has been made known, manifested, made visible through the gospel of Jesus. So Paul's assumption is that Jesus has the avenue through which God's faithfulness has been kept. All of humanity has proven unfaithful – Romans 1. The Jews are also unfaithful to God, including being unfaithful to carrying out their task of rescuing the world – that's Romans 2. But Jesus has been found faithful – and that's Romans 3. And that's where we're heading, but that's the logic of it all. Everybody is sinful – Romans 1, the Jews have not fulfilled their vocation in reaching the Gentiles – that's Romans 2, and Jesus has – Romans 3.

So, I want to talk about something peculiar about this quotation that Paul uses in Romans 2. Scholars often point out that there is some tension between the original context of Isaiah 52:5 and the way Paul uses it in Romans 2:24. For example, if you read the original text, Isaiah sounds more like he is consoling Israel than he is condemning Israel. But Paul turns it into a word of judgement. I talk about this in my book, the *Paul and the Meaning of Scripture* book. If you've got it, its pages 106 – 111. I'm not going to rehash all that here. But anyway, I think we can make sense of this in light of what we said a moment ago. So yes, there is some tension in the original verse and in the way Paul interprets the text. But we can see why Paul interprets it the way he does when we assume what Paul assumes as he interprets the text. Paul is reading this verse in light of Israel's calling to be a light to the nations. That's what matters for Paul.

Isaiah reports that God's name is being dishonored among the nations. And that Isaiah wants to comfort Israel in light of that. Paul employs this verse in a way that does not bring comfort, but in a way that brings conviction, you could say. He simply situates the verse into a new setting, a new context, and the main point for Paul is that God's name has been dishonored by the very people who were called to glorify it. By the very people who were supposed to bring the nations back to God. So, Israel's calling is the lens through which, the assumptions by which, Paul reads this verse afresh. But the good news, and perhaps we should just say gospel...the gospel is that Jesus has fulfilled the calling of Israel. Jesus has revealed the faithfulness of God, the righteousness of God to the nations. And in so doing, Jesus has done the job for Israel because Jesus is the faithful Israelite. And everyone who is in the Messiah finds themselves as part of the rescue plan for the world, too.

32:45 This brings us to verses 25-29. In the last episode I mentioned how the big questions of Romans 2 are first, who are the people of God; and secondly, how are they marked out as the people of God? In other words, who are the elect, and what are the markings of the elect? What are the markings of the covenant members? Another way to say this is, who are the members who are a part of the covenant family of God? Who are called to be the rescue plan for the world? In verses 25-29 those sorts of questions are on the forefront of Paul's mind. Since he has established that physical Israel has by in large not fulfilled the elect calling, and since as Paul will go on in chapters 3 and 4 to say, namely, that Jesus has fulfilled that calling, Paul must now lay down the groundwork for talking about who exactly the people of God truly are. And really he's already told us in Romans 1:16-17 we learn that it's everybody who places their

trust in Jesus the Messiah. But Paul didn't go into all the details. He didn't go into the details about Torah and Torah keeping, and covenant and all that. But here he's going to begin to spell it all out. This brings us to verse 25:

25 Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

So Paul is essentially saying, *'Look, one reason keeping Torah couldn't fully equip you to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant of being a light to the nations is because you're sinful. And if you are a Torah breaker, then what exactly does your circumcision mark you out as? Are you really a light to the nations?'* We can't miss what Paul is doing here. Again, he's not telling the Jews for the first time that they are sinful. That's old news. At least ever since the exodus. What he is doing is saying, *'Okay, how should the fact of our collective sin come to bear upon special vocation of rescuing the world? Is it enough that we have the sacrificial system? Or should we exhibit holiness in the ways that we walk?'* So verse 26 he says,

26 So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

Now Paul here is turning things around. Supposing that there are people who can keep the Torah despite being uncircumcised. Let's suppose that. Wouldn't this, by definition, mark them out as children of the covenant? That's what Paul seems to conclude in verses 27-29. He says there,

27 Then those who are physically uncircumcised (**Gentiles**) but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision (**the Jews**) but break the law. **28** For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. **29** Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

35:02 Okay, so there is a lot to say here, but let me just narrow it down to a few things. First, Paul's idea about keeping the law is not about works in the sense of legalism or anything like that. Again, go back and check out the last episode for that discussion. Paul seems to envision here, a keeping of the Torah that happens in the sense of loyalty to Jesus. Now true, he doesn't say that explicitly here just like that, but we can anticipate what he says elsewhere to fill in the gaps here. So for example, Romans 10:4, a verse that we've looked at previously, says that Jesus is the end of the Torah. He is the **telos (τέλος)**, which means culmination or the goal of Torah. So it's clear that Paul is talking here about Christian Gentiles, though not performing works of Torah such as circumcision, they nevertheless keep Torah in a spiritual, though no less real way.

The second thing is that we have to keep in mind the idea of covenant. As I've said, Romans 2 is baptized in the Abrahamic promise of Israel being alight to the world. It assumes this as its basic backdrop, its basic assumption. If we don't understand this, it's going to be difficult to appreciate all that Paul is doing later on in the book of Romans. So even here, the question is who are the people of God? Who are the elect? Who are those that are like Abraham in Genesis 17? Who are those that are partakers in the covenant of circumcision? According to Paul, physical descent from Abraham is not the whole story. What matters, says Paul, is heart circumcision.

Now Number three, I want to say is that this might seem all too convenient for Paul. I mean, he just spiritualizes the covenant. I wonder what his readers would think about this. It's about him saying, *'It's not about the outside, it's about the inside. It's not about the flesh, but it's about the heart.'* How can Paul say this? The Torah actually commanded physical circumcision. Genesis 17:14 – go check that out. So,

this turns out to be a very important question. And it's one that we won't get fully answered until Paul starts talking about the Abraham story in Romans 4. It's there in chapter 4 where he gets into the details of how he can understand the whole situation. He will show us fully how he can spiritualize the Abraham covenant. So we're going to have to wait. But that's okay, because before he can fully explain the story of the Abraham in Romans 4, he really needs to talk about how conceptually there really is a true circumcision of the heart. And he needs to say this because he thinks many Jews need to be reminded of this. They need to be reminded that this idea of spiritual circumcision doesn't come from him. It comes from the Torah. And as it turns out, that's what it says here in verse 29. So let me read verse 29: He says,

29 Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

So here Paul alludes to several passages of scripture, most notably to the Torah itself in Deuteronomy 10 and 30.

38:25 So in Deuteronomy 10, we see in verses 12-16, I'll go ahead and read this from the NRSV. It's really good. It says,

12 So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, **13** and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. **14** Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, **15** yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. **16** Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.

So here, that's Deuteronomy 10 verse 12-16. We see that there is in the Torah itself this idea of a circumcision of the heart. And in fact, here we just read that the Jews should circumcise their hearts because God has elected them, he has chosen them out of all the peoples. Again, that's in verse 15 and the Lord set his love on your ancestors alone and chose you and their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, so circumcise the foreskin of your heart. So, the idea of circumcision of the heart should be in response to Israel's elect status. Because you are elect, you should be circumcised *in your heart*. So this idea of circumcision of the heart is not Paul's invention. It's Torah's. It's Torah's invention. And you see this same idea in Deuteronomy chapter 30. And I'll read verses 1-6. It says,

When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, **2** and return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, **3** then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. **4** Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. **5** The LORD your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. **6** Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.

So here this idea of circumcision of the heart is the answer to the problem of exile. Because Israel has found themselves in exile, it's going to take an act of God to bring them back, to circumcise their hearts.

And why were they in exile? Because of their sin. And so you see this same idea here in Paul and Romans 2. You can see the narrative, the story from which Paul is writing. He is thinking along these lines. Israel is supposed to be light to the nations, but because of Israel's sin she has become a reproach to the nations. And she has actually dragged God's name through the dirt, and the Gentiles are blaspheming the name of God because of Israel. And so here, this is exile stuff. And the verse that Paul sites from Isaiah 52 is in the context of an exile passage. The passage that says in Romans 2:24, where Paul says, *'because of you, God's name is blasphemed among the nations.'* So Paul is thinking along these lines. He is thinking Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 10, Deuteronomy 30 – circumcision of the heart is the answer to exile. It is the answer to Israel's problem.

42:15 And so, it helps to know these texts. And I think that is what Paul is alluding to here in Romans 2:29. That circumcision is a matter of the heart. That being a true Jew is a matter of the heart. I think a case could be made that Paul is also thinking along the lines of Jeremiah 31:31-33. So here Jeremiah has a famous passage. If you know anything about Jeremiah you know this is one of the most important passages in Jeremiah. It's the so-called "new covenant" passage where Jeremiah prophesies about a new covenant. And this is what he says, Jeremiah 31:31-33, (34),

31 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. **32** It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. **33** But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **34** No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

So again, Paul is thinking along these lines that in the post exilic world, that God would come and act and circumcise their hearts so they would love Him. And this is what Paul is saying, that being a Jew is about *that*. And Paul is going to go on later in Romans to show how the circumcision of the heart happens. He says that it happens through the faithfulness of Christ by the Holy Spirit. And by alluding to Deuteronomy and Jeremiah in this text, Paul can truly say that, *"the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the law and the prophets."* That's Romans 3:21. That God's righteousness has been manifested, just like the law and the prophets said. You know, like Deuteronomy said. Like Jeremiah said. Circumcision of the heart.

So this circumcision of the heart idea – this spiritualizing circumcision is not Paul's invention. It comes from Torah. Paul is a good Jew. He was a good Jew until the day he died because he drew his theology from Torah. His theology, yes, is contextualized around the advent of Jesus the Messiah through whom the faithfulness of God is manifest. That's true. And I think it's in this way that God has shown himself faithful to raise up Israel to be the rescue plan for the world. And those who are outside of Israel, namely the Gentiles, even they can participate in the Abrahamic covenant. Both the Jews and Gentile will be *blessed* and they will be a *blessing*. And what this means is that even though Israel was found to be in sin, and even though Israel could not fulfill her calling to rescue the world, she would still end up rescuing the world. After all, God promised Abraham in Genesis 12 that He would use his family to do that job. That's why they were elected. That was their vocation. And God would show Himself faithful to that promise by raising up a faithful Israelite.

45:35 This is why Paul can say in Romans 3:21 & 22, *"But now, apart from the Torah, the righteousness of God has been manifested, with the Torah and the prophets bearing witness to it the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to all who believe."* See, for Paul the problem of Israel's sin led

to a deeper problem, namely that God's mission to rescue the world could not go on. Just as N.T. Wright has said in many of his lectures and in his books that, *'Israel is God's rescue plan for the world, but as it turns out, Israel needs to be rescued herself.'* And yet God has to use Israel to rescue the world even though Israel cannot be used to rescue the world. So the problem is on God's hands. The question is how will God be faithful? Is God's faithfulness nullified by the unfaithfulness of humans...of the Jew? No! That's Romans 3. We'll get to that next episode. But the short answer is, No! God is always faithful, even when His people are unfaithful. But the question is, *'okay, I get that... how will God be faithful to use the family of Abraham to rescue the world? How's God going to do that when He can't use Israel? He can't use Abraham's family.'* How? Well, He just finds a faithful Israelite who can do the job. He finds a son. The Son. The unique Son who does the job perfectly. And He will come to the earth. He will be baptized. He will cross the Jordan River to start His ministry of spiritual conquest, and God will look down upon Him and say, *"You are my Son in whom I am well pleased."* And if we have ears to hear, He will also say that to all of us. To those of us who have been united to Christ, who have been united to Jesus the Messiah. And we too can be sons and daughters of God. We can be blessed even if you're a Gentile. As Jews and Gentiles, we can part of the blessed covenant family of Abraham. And get this, we can also be part of the project of blessing the nations. That's why God through Christ call us to go among all the nations and to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. So that we can part of the Abrahamic covenant, Abrahamic vocation. That's what we do as elect. We go out to the non-elect and we share with them about Christ and how He wants to bring them back.

This is the message of Pentecost. Last Sunday was Pentecost Sunday and it's the Sunday that the church celebrates the Pentecost. Pentecost Sunday is that celebration of when people from all the nations were in the upper room and the Holy Spirit fell upon them, and for the first time in a long time people could understand each other, miraculously. Pentecost is the reversal of the Tower of Babel story. And all of this is tied in together. It is through Jesus, and His body, the church. Jesus is the true Israel. He reenacts the story of Israel in His whole ministry because He is the true Israelite. It is through Jesus that the whole world is rescued. Because God made a promise that it would be through Abraham's family that the world would be blessed. And truly indeed with Jesus Messiah, Abraham's family has truly rescued the world. And the only question left is this: Will you be part of that rescue plan? All you have to do is come to Jesus and to commit your life to Him. And to pledge your loyalty and allegiance to Jesus. Be part of the covenant community of God so that you can be blessed and so that you can be a blessing.

49:35 That's the end of today's episode. And thanks again for listening to The Bible Unmuted. If you like this podcast, consider rating it on your podcast platform, subscribing to it, and sharing with your friends. You can also support the podcast by becoming a patreon member. Go to: <https://www.patreon.com/TheBibleUnmuted> - or simply find the link in the description of this episode. Thanks for listening. Until next time, friends.