

Chapter 3

Verses 1–8 The True value of being Jewish

Well, you can see that this raises a whole bunch of questions and I explore them in the rest of the letter. And the first couple of these are about the point of being Jewish and the value of the practice of physical circumcision. Actually, these amount to two ways of asking the same thing. My answer is that these things really are important, just not in the way that some people seem to think. The first thing is that the scriptures were given to the Jewish community. It's true that some of us did not stay committed to the Instruction, but this could never stop God from keeping his promises! I suppose I used to think that it would. I believed that only when the whole Jewish community kept the Instruction properly would God choose to act to keep his ancient promises. I now realise this was a crazy way to think. As if people could manipulate God! God would be faithful to his promises no matter what. God is true to his word even if nobody else is.

This could amount to saying, given this background of Jewish unfaithfulness, that God's commitment to his promises looks even better; surely that's worth something? After all, we're making God look good! Humanly speaking, wouldn't that mean that we should get rewarded rather than judged?! But of course, it means nothing of the kind. If it did, God could not be the judge of anything or anyone. Even if one of my lies makes God's truth even more glorious, that would not turn the lie into truth or put me any less in the wrong. You might as well argue that we should all do wicked things because God might bring good out of them. Astonishingly, some people accuse me of saying just this. They think that if God can act without humans having done what they should, then there is no need for humans to do good at all! But, as I've tried to show, this is an absurd position.

My imaginary conversation partner makes a return to the discussion. I've had this conversation, and ones like it, lots of times over the years, sometimes with Jews, sometimes with Gentiles. I know the kind of objections that are likely to come. They're usually in the form of the sorts of questions I address in these verses.

1. I recognise that my imaginary conversation partner would object to my argument. Basically, they would say that since Jews and non-Jews are all treated the same, there's no point in being Jewish in the first place.

2. My response is that being Jewish is tremendously important, just not in the way that the questioner is implying. The most important reason we Jews are significant is that we have been entrusted with God's words. That is to say that the Instruction and the inspired words of the prophets have been committed to us and we have read them, listened to them, copied them, taught them, and protected them down the centuries. That's a pretty significant role. I'm very proud indeed to be Jewish. We really matter in the story of God's dealings with humanity.

3. Okay, says my conversation partner, what if some of the Jews were unfaithful? Is that going to stop God being faithful? Paul, says my partner, are you seriously suggesting that God's faithfulness to his promises could be cancelled out by our unfaithfulness? The truth is that there was a time when I thought that this might really be the case, but I can now see the absurdity of it. God is God. He does not depend on us for his attributes. I might as well ask whether we can change what God is like.

4. And of course, we can't change God! Indeed, even if every human being turned out to be a liar, God would still be true. I cite a text that expresses this idea. It's basically saying that God will always turn out to be in the right. It's from a psalm that I took to be King David's prayer of repentance. Human kings can get things wrong and be unfaithful; God cannot and is not. Once again, I'm back working with the picture of a law court. As always, God is the judge and, as always, God does the right thing.

5. The objections to my arguments keep coming. Some have said that human unfaithfulness throws God's faithfulness into stark relief, making it stand out and look even more impressive. Therefore, according to them, the effect of my argument is to say that human unfaithfulness is a good thing. This would mean that we should be rewarded for it rather than be held accountable for it. It's still a law court argument. Basically, my critics are arguing that God should let us off because we make him look good.

6. But this doesn't follow at all! If God were to reward us, the Jewish people, for our unfaithfulness, how could he have any integrity when he judged the rest of the world? He'd have to judge them by that same standard and the result would be to reward wrong and punish right. And that can't happen.

7. Here I press my imaginary opponent's argument one step further. I imagine him saying, and believe me, I've heard people say this kind of thing a great deal over the years, that if a human lie, human unfaithfulness, makes God seem even more glorious in his truthfulness and faithfulness, why should he, my opponent, face judgement as someone in the wrong? After all, he's put God in a good light.

8. And now I take the same argument from my imagined opponent and press it as far as it will go, mainly to show just how absurd it is. Based on their position, you might as well say that we should do evil because good can come out of it. Astonishingly, this is what some have accused me of saying! All I can say is that those who assert such things will get their comeuppance.

In this section I have been dealing with potential objections to my argument. I've tried to show that none of them really amounts to very much. I've relied throughout the argument on the picture of God as judge. There are lots of reasons to be proud of being Jewish. However, these are not always the reasons people imagine. God is always a fair judge, and he is impartial.

Verses 9-20 Jews and non-Jews are all in the same boat

So, yes, there's an advantage to being Jewish but no, not in the way you might think. As groups, Jews and non-Jews have both got it wrong. It may be more obvious in the case of the non-Jews but it's true of every category of humanity. I categorise the present condition of every type of humanity as 'under Sin'. The meaning of this is something that I'll explore later but I should probably say at this point that I tend to talk about sin as though it was a person; it is a power. Those who have not lived as God intended, whether or not they know the Instruction, all live under the rule of this power. I then quote some texts from different parts of the scriptures to reinforce the point that everyone is in this category. This is still part of my engagement with my Jewish conversation partner. We have established

common ground by agreeing that the Gentiles are under Sin. I deploy the texts as the culmination of my case that the same is true of the Jews.

The sharp-eyed among you will recognise that these texts come from the prophets and the psalms, not from the part of the Bible we call the Instruction. However, when I say these texts are from the 'Law' I am using the word as a kind of abbreviation for the Instruction and the Prophets, which is a way of talking about the whole of the scriptures. In other words, these scriptures, which support my contention that all are under Sin, are about, and are addressed to, those who know the scriptures, which is to say, to Jewish people. Therefore, I regard my case proven that every category of person, Jew and Gentile, is under Sin, is answerable to its creator, and has no defence.

Yes, this applies to the Jews too. Because things like circumcision and the hearing of the Instruction do not bring vindication in God's court. This is what I mean when I make the point that the 'works of the Instruction' cannot justify. I think I could have been a little clearer about what I meant by this. However, if you've been following the argument, you will know what I must have been trying to say. I am referring to the outward or external marks that the Instruction requires – male circumcision is the most obvious example, but it includes other things that function to define Jewish cultural identity. And my point is that these things, important as they may be in other respects, are not the things that count before God. Of course, this does not mean that the Instruction is worthless. It has real value, just not the value that others think that it has. One of its purposes – it has lots of others too, but this is the one I want to focus on at this point in the letter – is that it brings about an awareness of Sin. This is another one of those arguments that I will pick up the thread of a bit later. For now, let me spell out one of the implications of this. Non-Jews are under Sin, as I have demonstrated, but since they do not have the Instruction, they are unaware of their situation. Jews, who are also under Sin, *do* have the Instruction and so *are* aware, or ought to be, of their position.

9. I have stated before that there is a real significance in being Jewish. However, this significance does not make us any better off than non-Jews when it comes to the right way to be human. As I have already argued, every type of human, both Jews and non-Jews, have lived in ways other than the one God intended, which is to say that they are under the rule of the power I call 'Sin'.

10–18. I then offer this collection of texts from the psalms and the prophets which all make the point that the group being addressed do things that are wrong. My aim here is not to prove that the non-Jews have lived in ways that do not conform to God's purposes. Basically, all my readers, and most of the people who object to my teaching, accept that that is the case. The point of the texts is to prove that Jewish people are in just the same position as non-Jews. It was Jews who wrote these texts, and it is to Jewish people that they are addressed.

19. I know these texts do not come from the Instruction itself. However, they do come from elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures, from within the wider collection of scripture encompassing 'The Instruction, the Prophets and the Writings' or, as I say here, 'The Instruction' for short. The point is that the words are addressed to Jewish people. They, just like the non-Jews, have lived in ways that go against what God intended for humans. Remember, I'm still working with the picture of God as judge. At this point, I imagine a courtroom scene in which all the defendants have been arguing their case. Now, they all

recognise the sheer weight of the evidence against them and as a result they fall silent. They realise that they are guilty as charged and all they can do is await the verdict of the judge.

20. I go back, still thinking of the courtroom scene, to the particular case of Jewish people, that is, the people who know the Instruction. I've already shown that possession of the Instruction does not mean a person lives in the way God intended. I've also shown that having the outward mark of commitment to the Instruction – male circumcision – does not mean you live as God intended. Neither these outward manifestations of the Instruction, nor other things in that category, mean that you live as God intended. This is another way of saying that those who rely on these outward manifestations of the Instruction will not be vindicated at the judgement. In fact, one of the functions of the Instruction is to make us aware that we are not living in the way that God intended, which is to say that it makes us aware of 'Sin'. I shall say more about this later in the letter.

The purpose of this brief passage with all its references to scripture has been to show that, as far as failing to live in the way God intended is concerned, Jewish people stand in just the same position as non-Jewish people. None of us have lived as he wanted and so all of us face God's judgement. Some talk as though possession of the Instruction ought to make a difference to this, but, as I have shown, it really doesn't. What it does do is, among other things, let you know that you are failing to live as God intended.

Verses 21–25 God's solution to the human dilemma

And this brings me to what is really the centre of this part of the argument. What God has done is to keep his promises without any reference to the Instruction. This is one of the key things that took me by surprise. As a Pharisee, I believed that God had given his people the Instruction and that it was through this that he would keep his ancient promises. However, he chose to keep those promises other than through the Instruction. He took a kind of bypass! Of course, it's not unrelated to the Instruction; it and the rest of the scriptures contain those promises and hint at the way in which they would be kept.

The promise-keeping of God came through the faithfulness of King Jesus and is for all – that is, for every person, whatever their category – who is true to him. You see, in the end, all the old distinctions count for nothing, for every category of person has gone wrong and misses out on what God originally intended for us. And more than this, those who are to be vindicated, whether Jew or non-Jew, get this as pure gift, an act of sheer generosity, through the liberation offered in King Jesus.

Going back to the issue of 'wrath' we were discussing earlier. Remember this is language that belongs to the courtroom, and I use the word in the specialised sense of the thing that motivates those authorised to act in judgement. That image is still present in the argument. God's desire to see justice done was dealt with through King Jesus. I say that this happened through his blood, by which I mean his life of faithful obedience to God; an obedience that King Jesus knew would mean his death. The word I use for 'dealt with' is borrowed from the language of the temple; it's used for the mercy seat. I suppose I'm mixing my metaphors here to bring together three different but related ideas; the idea of a courtroom, the idea of liberation – using language drawn from the Exodus story – and ideas about temple sacrifice. The key idea to grasp is that those who are embraced by King Jesus, and are loyal to him, get vindicated, get set free, and get their transgressions

covered. This all happens because he preferred to die rather than to be disobedient. All this showed that God was keeping his promises because, being patient and kind, he had not thoroughly addressed human wrong before. God did this to show his faithfulness in the present, so that he might be both vindicated – that is, shown to be in the right – and the one who vindicates those who embrace King Jesus. God is vindicated because he is shown through all this to be faithful and true.

21. Do you remember the main theme of the letter that I set out earlier in 1:16–17? I said there that the gospel reveals the faithfulness of God; it shows that he has kept his ancient promises. It's God's way of bringing back to the whole world the way of being human that he originally intended. As a Pharisee I had understood that when God acted to do these things, he would do it through the Instruction. In other words, they would happen when the Jewish people complied with the Instruction. As you might know, our focus as Pharisees, in trying to get this sort of compliance, was on the outward manifestations of the Instruction because, apart from anything else, these were easier to enforce. I now realise that my expectations were wholly misplaced. God had acted to keep his promises in a different way altogether – not through the Instruction! Of course, both the Instruction and the prophetic writings tell us that God *would* keep his promises and, now that I study them from a fresh perspective, I can see that they do indeed suggest how he would go about doing it.

22. God has not kept his promises through the Instruction; he has done it through the faithfulness, that is, the faithful obedience, of King Jesus. This is something that is for every category of person, both Jews and non-Jews, who place their trust in King Jesus, for, as far as these issues are concerned, as I hope I have shown in the argument so far, there is no difference. Lots of people think that I argue that the key issue is faith *in* Jesus. Well, of course that's really important, but if you think about it, it puts the emphasis on us and on our faith, which isn't quite right. What I'm really trying to speak about is the faithfulness *of* Jesus; that's what demonstrates that God has been faithful.

23. Here I am repeating one of the key things I've argued up to this point. Every category of person has failed to live in the way God intended when he created humanity. That is to say, every type of person has sinned and has therefore failed to get the blessing and honour God originally meant to give us. Psalm 8 suggests that God planned to crown humanity with glory. Our refusal to live in the way God intended got in the way of that. This psalm is very important in my thinking. I've always understood it to be about Adam. It expresses God's original intention for Adam – and so for all humans. Of course, I believe that the promise is fulfilled in King Jesus, the one to whom all things are made subject. I discussed this text in one of my letters to the church in Corinth.¹

24. Here's the thing. Those who trust in what King Jesus has done get to be vindicated at the final judgement – which is to say, as I have said, that they are starting to live in the way God originally intended – and they receive this out of God's sheer generosity; it is pure gift. It comes through God's act of liberation that he has carried out through King Jesus. I am borrowing Exodus language here because, as we shall see later, Jesus-followers have crossed over from one way of life to another, out of Egypt to the land of promise, out of one way of being into another, out of Death into Life.

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:27.

25. So what happened? Here I borrow language from the temple. At the heart of the temple in Jerusalem was the holiest place and there stood the throne of God and the ark of the covenant. It was the place of God's presence. The cover of the ark was called the mercy seat. It was over that mercy seat that God, on the Day of Atonement, was manifested in a cloud. The high priest would enter the holiest place with the blood of the sin offerings and sprinkle them both on and in front of the mercy seat. In this way, there would be atonement for the sins of the people and for the holiest place itself. This means that the sin of the people, their failure to live as God had intended, was dealt with. Using this temple imagery, I claim that God offered King Jesus as this kind of sacrifice. I say God did this through Jesus' blood. This is my way of referring to Jesus' act of faithful obedience that meant his death. God did this to demonstrate his own faithfulness to his promises. God, in his patience and kindness, had not fully dealt with Sin before this.

I can see in retrospect that I've packed quite a lot of ideas into a couple of sentences. What I'm getting at is that God cannot fulfil his promises without addressing the issue of human sin, our failure to live as God intended, and its consequences. In the past God had dealt with this, for the Jewish people, in annual rituals. As far as other nations were concerned, God had not chosen to allow the full extent of the consequences to play out. Now he has addressed these things fully through the faithful obedience to the extent of the death of King Jesus. In the temple, the sacrifice stood in for the Jewish people. Now King Jesus stands in place of those sacrifices for all people.

As I argued earlier, one of the consequences of humans living in ways other than one God intended is wrath. And by 'wrath' I mean that which motivates a judge to act. The obedience of King Jesus means that for those who give him their allegiance, there is no longer anything that motivates God to act in judgement.

Verses 26–31 The Instruction itself teaches this

So, any boasting about the Instruction seems a bit pointless in light of this. But it's boasting about hearing and possessing the Instruction, and about circumcision, that's pointless. There's another attitude to the Instruction that makes sense – the loyalty to Jesus aspect of the Instruction. You see, it is loyalty to King Jesus, and through him to the true, inner, spiritual purpose of the Instruction that he represents, that leads to the right way to live. That is what vindicates a person. Commitment to the outer aspects of the Instruction alone cuts no ice with God. Another way to say this is that a person gets vindicated in God's courtroom based on our allegiance to Jesus and this happens without reference to the outward manifestations of the Instruction. If it worked on the basis of those outward manifestations, it would suggest that God is only the God of those who have the Instruction, that is, the Jews. But that can't be right. There's only one God and therefore he must be God of the non-Jews too. All can be vindicated in the same way – trust in King Jesus. This is true whether or not people are physically circumcised.

Over the years I had encountered all kinds of objections to this teaching. Most of the objections came from the way that people understood some of the teaching found in the Instruction. It had been suggested by some that my teaching amounted to overthrowing the Instruction. The truth is, as I shall try to demonstrate, I am following the Instruction here. As will become clearer later, I am advocating the true, inward, spiritual purpose of the Instruction, as opposed to its outward aspects. But I can also make my case from the written Instruction itself; after all, the story of Abraham is found in the Instruction and, if

you read it carefully, you'll see that I'm fully supporting what it teaches. I will show how that works in chapter 4.

26. God has done this now to show that he is faithful to his ancient promises; that he is true to his word. This demonstrates that he is himself vindicated, that is, in the right, and is the one who vindicates, that is, finds in favour of, those who are embraced by the faithfulness of Jesus.

27. God has done it all and so there is no place for humans to boast about anything. However, which aspect of the Instruction has seen off human boasting? The aspect related to outward appearances? No. Rather it is the aspect concerned with inward things like faith and trust that has accomplished this.

28. My teaching is that living in the way that God intended – the way that leads to a person being vindicated at the judgement – happens through the inward rather than outward manifestations of the Instruction.

29. Otherwise, it would be as though God were only God of the Jews and that can't be right, can it? After all, they're the only ones who have those outward manifestations. But isn't the one God also God of non-Jews? Of course he is! You see, only the Jews can know about the outward stuff, but others can conceivably get the inward stuff. And that's the stuff that really counts.

30. After all, there's only one God and he's not divided. So, he will vindicate every kind of person on exactly the same basis. Whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, it's about living as God intended. That means that it's really about the true, inward aspect of the Instruction. That's what I'm getting at when I say it's all done through faith. Clearly, this is more courtroom language. We're back to the idea that God is impartial and is a fair judge.

31. Some people misunderstand me on this point. Given the position I take, they think I am using faith to undermine the Instruction. In fact, when you remember it's true purpose, I'm upholding the Instruction. I'll demonstrate this point in the next section of the letter by reminding you of a story told in it.

God's faithfulness to his promises is demonstrated through the obedience unto death of King Jesus. This is the basis on which God enables people, whether they are Jews or non-Jews, to live in the way he intended and so to be the people he will vindicate at the judgement. These are people who may or may not be marked by the outward manifestations of the Instruction; however, they are all marked by faith in what God has done and this means their lives are shaped by the inward, true purposes of the Instruction. I shall explore these points in more detail later. You will see how the Instruction itself came to lead in two different directions and this led to many people becoming conflicted. I will also show how God has, through King Jesus, resolved this terrible situation. You will see that my teaching upholds the true purpose of the Instruction and does not, as many claim, undermine it.

There are a number of pictures at work in my account. In my mind they all work together. However, it may be worth unravelling them. One is the law court where God is an impartial judge. He is the one who decides who is vindicated and who is not. The faithful obedience of King Jesus means that he is vindicated. I have suggested that others, those who pledge

allegiance to Jesus, may be too but I have not yet spelled out how that happens. The next picture is temple sacrifice. In the past an animal was offered so that it stood in for the people of God. The obedience lay with the people who offered it rather than with the animal that was sacrificed. King Jesus is a different sort of sacrifice because he *chose* (no animal ever chose to be sacrificed) to be obedient unto death. The third metaphor is that of redemption. This hints at the idea of making a payment to set people free from slavery. In my mind this image is strongly associated with the story of the Exodus when the people of God were freed from slavery in Egypt. For me the Exodus becomes a key pattern for understanding that action of King Jesus in setting people free. In the Exodus God's people were set free from Pharaoh so that they could live for God. King Jesus sets his people free from Sin with the same goal in mind. There will be further exploration of many of these ideas later in the letter.