

- h. The context that spans verses 3:9-20 serves an important role in the forward movement of Paul's argumentation. First of all, it is evident from 3:9 that it represents a continuation of the preceding eight verses. But much more, this passage presents a summary of all of Paul's instruction from 1:18, which instruction he intended to exalt the gospel formally introduced in verses 1:16-17 by showing its absolute necessity for the Jew as well as the Gentile.
- The gospel is necessary for all because of the universal reality and unrighteousness of unbelief. Though they know God, all men suppress the truth of that knowledge in order to worship and serve themselves. In this way they bring themselves under God's just condemnation (1:18-32).
- Contrary to Jewish conviction and confidence, this unbelief characterizes the Jew as well as the Gentile. Because God judges all men without partiality according to their objective righteousness, the Jew stands in the same predicament as the Gentile. For though he possesses the Law, he does not keep it, which also serves to render his circumcision *uncircumcision*. Therefore, the two great points of Jewish confidence before God are an illusion; the sons of Israel have as much need of divine righteousness reckoned by faith as does the "lawless" Gentile.
- Yet, despite universal unbelief, the faithfulness of God is neither nullified nor depreciated. On the contrary, the unrighteousness of human unbelief demonstrates God's righteousness and His faithfulness to His oracles. Because these oracles insist upon God's righteousness as the basis of man's condemnation as well as his subsequent justification, they speak to the need of all men and establish their responsibility of faith in the gospel.

And so Paul capped his argument with his insistence that "*both Jews and Greeks are all under sin*" (3:9b). By his own acknowledgment this charge is the substance of his preceding instruction, so that it must be regarded as his summary point, regardless of whether 3:9a is interpreted in terms of the Jew having an advantage over the Gentile or being at a disadvantage with respect to him. In the end, though the sons of Israel had great historical and covenantal privilege, they stood in the same place of condemnation as the Gentiles; neither the Law nor circumcision provided to them any mitigating righteousness. If they were to be righteous before God, they must gain *His* righteousness that comes only through faith in Christ. Like the Gentiles, the hope of the Jews lay in the gospel.

*"The Jews have an unassailable salvation-historical advantage: God has spoken to them and he has given them promises that will not be retracted. But, as Paul has repeatedly emphasized in chap. 2, the Jews have no advantage at all when it comes to God's impartial judgment of every person 'according to his or her works.' And this is the issue that Paul is addressing in v. 9...Paul is referring to the comprehensive indictment of humanity in 1:18-2:29, as first the Greek or the Gentile and then the Jew were brought before the divine bar and found wanting."*

*"We have, then, in this statement, Paul's own comment on his purpose in this section of his letter. All people who have not experienced the righteousness of God by faith are 'under sin': that is, they are helpless captives to its power...Nothing that Paul has said suggests that there are exceptions to this rule, and nothing shows more clearly the desperate need for the message of the gospel. For the problem with people is not just that they commit sins; their problem is that they are enslaved to sin. What is needed, therefore, is a new power to break in and set people free from sin - a power found in, and only in, the gospel of Jesus Christ."* (Douglas Moo, emphasis in original)

- 1) In support of his contention of universal sinfulness Paul proceeded to draw from a number of Old Testament contexts (3:10-18). First and foremost these citations serve to uphold his central premise that the innate principle of human unrighteousness/lie/unbelief demonstrates clearly and unequivocally the righteousness/truth/faithfulness of God. Specifically, they do so by demonstrating that God's oracles repeatedly attest the wretched human condition and attribute it to all people without exception. In this way they establish the necessary foundation for their own introduction of, as well as their insistence upon, the righteousness of God as the sole remedy for man in his helpless plight (cf. 3:10-18 and 3:19-24).

Paul's collection of citations has been approached in different ways, with some scholars finding in them a randomness that defies categorization, and others claiming to discover a cohesive structure of one sort or another. The logical and orderly character of Paul's thought argues against the idea of arbitrariness, and a more careful consideration of these verses seems to indicate the following flow:

- a) He began with a summary statement that parallels his overall contention in the larger context, namely, that *there is none righteous* (3:10).
- b) In proof of that contention Paul then provided to the Romans five points of scriptural support: there is none who understands, none who seeks for God, none who has not turned aside, none who has not rendered himself useless, none who does good (3:11-12). In these citations the language of *universal* indictment is conspicuous.
- c) From there he turned specifically to issues of unrighteousness that implicate men as *liars*: their throats are open graves and they use their tongues for the purpose of deception and destruction (3:13); consistent with that they fill their mouths with the vileness of cursing and bitterness (3:14). This emphasis, too, carries forward his larger contextual argument that human sin is grounded in *unbelief* - the result of the Fall is that all men are self-worshippers, and therefore liars who suppress the truth (ref. 1:18-25, 3:1-4).

- d) Finally, Paul pointed to the fruit of man's estrangement as image-bearer. First of all he is alienated from himself and other men, and so consigned to violence, destruction and misery (3:15-17). But even more, men are estranged from God: "*there is no fear of God before their eyes*" (3:18). This final aspect of Paul's indictment is the most important because it is both foundational and overarching.

It is noteworthy that these citations, with the exception of verses 3:15-17 which are excerpted from Isaiah 59:7-8, are drawn entirely from the psalms (specifically Psalm 5, 10, 14 (cf. 53), 36, and 140). Each of these psalms is similar in that they all have as a central theme the sharp contrast between the *righteous* man and the *wicked* man. As well, in each this contrast is developed along two lines: the first is the conflict that exists between the individuals themselves, and the second is their respective relationships with God.

- In the case of the former, the conflict between the righteous man and the wicked man is focused upon the tangible oppression and spiritual vexation that the wicked impose upon the righteous, and which result in their need of and petition for divine deliverance.
- As to the latter, God's interaction with each class of men is related, but in an opposing way. That is, God acts in His sovereign power on behalf of the righteous to deliver him from the wicked, *but He does so by judging and ultimately destroying the wicked*. Note again how this dynamic is simply another articulation of the dominant redemptive theme of the Day of the Lord.

What is crucial to observe is that God and His righteousness are at the center of the relational dynamic between the righteous and the wicked. This is evident first and foremost from the fact that the point of distinction between these two groups of men is their relationship with God: *the righteous fear God - they live in conscious, submissive faith in Him, whereas the wicked have no such fear*. Their faith is what provokes the righteous to call upon and entrust themselves to Yahweh's delivering hand (cf. 5:1-3, 10:12-18, 14:4-7, 36:5-11, 140:1-13), even as the wicked man's unbelief leads him to deny, mock, and spurn Him. The righteous man is the man of *faith*, and his reward is peace, security and blessing in Yahweh's presence; the unrighteousness of the wicked is centered in his *unbelief*, and his recompense is destruction (cf. 5:4-7, 36:11-12, 53:4-5).

Paul's point becomes even more focused by his citation of Isaiah 59:7-8. For in that context the prophet was specifically referencing *Israel's* unbelief. It is not only the pagan Gentile who is guilty of living apart from the fear of God; as Paul previously insisted, even the covenant people of Israel, with all their privilege, were brazen suppressors of the truth.

The common thematic structure woven through all of these passages must not be overlooked, for it provides important insight into Paul's reasoning in his choice of Old Testament scripture. What it reveals is that his emphasis has not shifted from the larger context; his concern here, as throughout, was to demonstrate to his readers that all men are sinners *and that the essence of all sin is unbelief*. By implication, even as God's righteousness as revealed in the gospel is the sole remedy for sin, so *faith* is the sole means by which that righteousness is appropriated (1:16-17).

- 2) Verses 3:19-20, then, serve to summarize Paul's argument. This summarization applies first to the preceding citations, but more broadly to the entire context of 1:18-3:18. The gospel is God's power for salvation *to all who believe*, and toward establishing the necessity of faith for righteousness Paul showed that neither Jew nor Gentile has any righteous standing before God. The Jew would have readily agreed with Paul's indictment of the heathen Gentiles, but he viewed *himself* as being in an entirely different category. He enjoyed the privilege of covenant standing as attested by his circumcision, and he further possessed and applied himself to the Law that God had given uniquely to Israel.

Despite the great advantage enjoyed by the Jew and his confidence before God by virtue of it, Paul's insistence was that neither the Law of Moses nor circumcision provided any benefit to him unless he satisfied the *righteousness* expressed by them. Neither is this righteousness found in outward conformity to the Law and the sign of circumcision: "*he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter*" (2:11-29). At this point, every honest Jew had to concede failure, yet Paul certified his charge by presenting God's own indictment of Gentile and Jew alike (3:9-18). Whatever the Jews' religious confidence, God Himself declared that "*all are under sin*."

It is this development of argumentation that makes Paul's summary assertions in vv. 19-20 readily discernable. The greatest apparent difficulty with these statements is his repeated use of the noun *law*. This, more than anything else, has led to divergence among interpreters. Some have insisted that each of the four occurrences must be understood in the same way, while others have introduced new meanings of the concept of "law" in order to make sense of Paul's statements. But exegetical considerations lead to the conclusion that the first two occurrences of the noun *law* refer to the *Old Testament scriptures* as a whole (3:19), and the final two to the *righteous prescriptions* contained in those scriptures, most particularly within the Law of Moses (3:20). Thus Paul's meaning in 3:19 is that God's universal condemnation as revealed in His law - that is, in His *inspired revelation* - applies to the Jews entrusted with God's oracles (ref. 3:1-2) and not only to the heathen. His citation from Isaiah 59 in which God condemns Israel makes this conclusion inescapable.

The result of this universal condemnation is that every mouth is shut and the entire world is made accountable to God. Paul's language is that of the courtroom, and he was painting a portrait of an accused party standing before God's tribunal. In his imagery the accused is reduced to silence as he stands before his divine accuser, unable to refute or mitigate in any way the charges against him. Again, it is not simply the Gentile who is obligated to see himself as the accused party; the *whole world* stands justly accused before God and is liable to His righteous punishment.

The grammar of verse 3:20 indicates that it either provides the *reason* for Paul's assertion in 3:19 or else the *certification* of it. Depending upon how these two views are conceived there is arguably little difference between them. What is clear is that Paul's design in 3:20 was to put the capstone on his contention that mankind is universally condemned. The fact that it was the Jew who so readily exempted himself on the basis of the Law provides strong support for the view that *law* in this verse refers to the Mosaic Law.

Throughout the second chapter he showed in numerous ways that an Israelite could not find his confidence in the Law of Moses, and this insistence is here reiterated. Like the heathen Gentile, the Jew was silenced and condemned before the bar of God, not because he lived in darkness *apart* from the Law, but because he sinned *under* the Law (ref. 2:12-13). Neither were there any exceptions; given the nature of sin and the Law's obligation of entire, inward conformity to God, every son of Israel, along with every Gentile, stood guilty. Thus Paul could adamantly affirm: "*by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight.*"

On the contrary, "*through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.*" By this Paul did not mean simply that the Law of Moses informed the Jew's understanding with respect to obedience and unrighteousness by its commands and prescriptions. If this were the case he would have failed to prove his assertion of universal guilt, for the fact that the Law *informs* the mind and conscience does not imply that every person so informed *violates* the Law. Paul's meaning was that the Law, operating in the context of human depravity, acts to *provoke* and *nurture* sin rather than merely define it. It does so in several discrete ways, but always through the reality of human self-idolatry. For the Law showed Israel what it is to be a true son of God - a son whose heart, mind, affections, and will are a perfect reflection of God's. But fallen man is *estranged* from God; he lives as his own god. Thus the Law, in making men conscious of God's demands, provokes in some informed, willful rebellion. But more subtly, those who labor to *fulfill* the Law's demands while being self-idolaters are equally condemned, not simply because they fall short of those demands at certain points, but because their *obedience* is purely *self-righteousness*, and therefore sin. This was the essence of Israel's blindness and calamity, and is the reason that the gospel was such a point of stumbling for them.