

## 240630am Sermon Transcript

James Midwinter

### Romans 3:1-8

*(This sermon transcript is an extract of a video recording of the full service. The numbering is auto-applied and reflects the number of minutes into recording that the transcript relates to.)*

48:05

Well, in four days time

48:08

we are going to be heading to the polls and we will then learn who our new government will be.

48:14

And a little later in Romans, Paul is going to remind us that there is no authority except that which God has established. Aren't you thankful for that?

48:24

I am.

48:26

Whichever party takes office come Friday,

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they will not ultimately be there because of our appointment.

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They will ultimately be there because of God's appointment,

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and however faithfully or unfaithfully they serve God or us, God's plans for our country will prevail.

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I've been mulling over Proverbs 9:16 over the course of this past week. In their hearts, humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.

49:02

That's what we can cling on to in the face of whatever may happen at the end of this week. And for some of you, the end of this week cannot come soon enough. You are tired of election campaigning but others of you have got really into it.

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You followed all of the debates with the different party leaders, you've perhaps attended hustings in your constituency. And if you followed any of the campaigns, you will have heard lots of different people saying we're radically different to everyone else.

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Now whether that's true

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and whether you believe them or not are entirely different questions, but that's the pitch. We're entirely different to everyone else and they will have made big claims about all sorts of things on which they are different. It may be taxes, it may be the NHS, it may be a new national service scheme, whatever. It may be.

49:58

What happens when a candidate, when a party, make a massive claim like that?

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Everybody asks questions, certainly,

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but whether it's in a debate, whether it's in a hustings, all sorts of questions are gonna follow. If you make a big statement like that,

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who's gonna fund it?

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Who's gonna be accountable and responsible for it? What's gonna replace the thing that you're leaving behind?

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And Romans 3 is a bit like the Question Time in a hustings or a debate.

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By the end of Romans 2,

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Paul has dismantled the Jewish understanding of the Old Covenant.

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To Jewish ears, Paul's gospel is radically different to everything that they had understood beforehand.

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So the next thing that Paul does in chapter 3 verses 1 to 8 is he answers four questions, 4 objections that people may have had in his day to what he has just said.

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A poll wasn't a politician. It didn't campaign for an election,

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but Paul did travel around all of those Jewish synagogues teaching and explaining what the gospel meant.

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And what he's doing in our text this morning is he's answering the questions that were all important to the people in his day.

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To us today, they may not seem like big issues

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because in Paul's day, one of the many things that he was trying to do was both established and distinguished Christianity from Judaism.

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And that's not our issue. We're 2000 years later in human history, Christianity has been established and is thriving all over the world. But the heart issues

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and the theological issues that Paul was addressing are still the same today.

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So it's challenging as it is. And, and he's right that it's harder in one sense to to dig into a passage like this. There is truth for us to learn from today just as much as there is in the rest of God's word. And that brings us to the first objection that Paul engages with. Doesn't the gospel undermine Judaism and the Old covenant?

52:17

Doesn't the gospel undermine Judaism and the Old covenant? That's the issue in verses one and two. But you cannot understand that question until you look back at the end of chapter 2, which is why Joe very kindly read from verse 25. And if you skim over versus 25 to 29,

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Paul has completely redefined what everyone thought it meant to be a Jew. And that's important. It's not what God said about being a Jew, but what everyone thought it meant to be a Jew. So in Paul's day, if you were an ethnic Jew and if you're a male, if you'd been circumcised, you considered yourself to be part of the people of God and you were safe from God's judgement. It was as simple as that.

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But Paul explains that's not how God ever intended his people to think.

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So if uncircumcised Gentiles kept God's law. Verse 26

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God would regard them uncircumcised Gentiles as His people, not the circumcised Jews who broke His law.

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In fact, if you reverse his 28 and 29 carefully, Paul's setting the foundation here for his Not All Israel are Israel's argument that is gonna take over the whole of chapters 9:10 and 11:00,

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and that's massive.

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I cannot overstate how significant that change in understanding was in Paul's day. For for Paul's, for Jews in Paul's day to hear that they couldn't presume to be the eternally secure people of God simply by their ethnicity and by surgery was massive.

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Because you think of what it meant for them to be Jews.

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For the history up until this point,

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well go back to the very beginning. God made his great promises to Abraham. He called Abraham out from an A Pagan land, and he promised to Abraham to bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him. All the peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham and his offspring, and those promises were sealed to those people with the covenant sign.

54:33

And as the generations move on, it's Jacob's descendants whom God rescues from Egypt. It's Moses and Gods people who he gives his law to, if any presences himself with them as they journey to the Promised Land. And when they established themselves in the Promised land, all of God's blessings are intended to draw the other nations in, to see the goodness and the faithfulness of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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So for good reasons and bad,

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the Israelites looked on centuries of blessings

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and considered themselves as an ethnic people

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to be the unshakeably secure people of God.

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So

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they reply in verses one and two of of chapter 3. They replied to Paul and say, well, you've said at the end of chapter 2

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that it doesn't matter whether you are an ethnic Jew or circumcised or not to be part of the people of God. So what's the point in being a Jew?

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What is the point in being concerned about whether I am actually a part of the ethnic family of Abraham? What's the point if I'm a man of going through the pain of surgery? What is the advantage of being Jewish?

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Spent a long time this week trying to work out if there's any modern comparison and my conclusion is there isn't because how unique the role is of the Jewish people in redemptive history.

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But if you want to get a sense of some of the shock that pulls First heroes were wrestling with,

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I want you to think about some Taylor Swift fans.

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Hang with me for a mini.

56:19

If you're a genuine Swifty, you have bought every single record that she has ever produced.

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You will have memorised the lyrics to the songs that she sings. You perhaps have invested a small fortune, going to see her on her tour and then a separate fortune in getting there and staying there. Not an insignificant part of your life has been shaped by being a Swifty.

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I want you to imagine that you get to the concert

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and you discover that the security guards are letting

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anyone in.

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Not just people have got tickets,

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people who don't even know Taylor's name,

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people who have never heard a single song she is saying, people who haven't spent a single penny

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on anything that she has ever done,

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and everyone's just being let in

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what the reaction of a genuine Swifty is gonna be.

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Well, what's the point of everything that I've invested in if now you're just gonna let everybody in?

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Here In Romans, Paul's responding to a much bigger question.

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But it has that same shock value and greater.

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Here's a Jew saying, well, what's the point

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in me being a Jew

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if you're going to welcome anybody in as your people?

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The the unspoken assumption here that the Jews are wrestling with is that they thought that simply by being Jewish they were safe from God's judgement.

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And throughout Romans one and two, Matthew has shown us that that is not what God's word has always taught. Ethnicity and a religious sign aren't sufficient to save everyone. So when Paul asked, when Paul is asked the question, So what's the point in being a Jew?

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We're all expecting him to say what he doesn't say until verse 9. If you look at verse 9,

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we're all expecting him to say, do we Jews have any advantage? Not at all.

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Now, if you're thinking that being a Jew is what makes you saved before God,

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that's not what he says in verse 2.

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Even after everything that he's talked about in chapter 2, what he says in verse two is there's great value in being a Jew in all sorts of ways.

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First of all, he says, now what comes to mind whenever anybody says to you, first of all, you're expecting a list, right? And we don't have a list here. I think if you jump forward to Chapter 9,

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and if you think my meanderings can sometimes take a while, I think Paul doesn't finish his thought in chapter 3 until he gets to Chapter 9 and verses 4:00 and 5:00.

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I think it comes back to the blessings that flow for the Jews in Chapter 9 versus 4 and five is gonna talk about them. There's the adoption to sonship. There's a divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, the promises. There's the patriarchs, and from them it's Tracy, human ancestry of the Messiah. They're the uniquely Jewish blessings that belong to God's Jewish people, the Jewish nation.

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But that's not what he's focusing on in chapter 3.

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The advantage that matters here is that the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God,

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and that

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is a gift beyond compare,

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Moses said in Deuteronomy chapter 4. What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I'm setting before you today?

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No one can be saved simply by that general revelation that is made of God in creation. We've seen that over chapters one and two, haven't we?

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The only way anybody can be saved is if God reveals Himself to us, and that's what Paul's saying. God has been doing through the Jewish scriptures for the whole time of the Old Covenant.

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But having those scriptures wouldn't save them on their own.

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And Matthew showed us last week that the Israelites needed to respond to that word. It's not. It's not sufficient to have the word. You have to put personal faith and trust in the living Word in order for it to bring you into a right relationship with God. But you can't respond to a message you haven't heard. And we're going to get to that later. In Romans, too,

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the Jews had been entrusted with the very words of God,

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and Paul's saying that is a massive blessing.

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As we work through Romans, we're going to see that the Gospel does not undermine Judaism or the Old Covenant.

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Jesus fulfils them.

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He's the one who brings in a new and bigger covenant that the Old Covenant had always looked forward to.

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But that gospel message

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was completely different to how many Jews thought

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they thought that their birth certificate and surgery guaranteed that they were safe come what may.

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And Paul's gonna address that wrong way of thinking all the way through the rest of his letter. All he's saying in chapter 3 is don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.



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Know the way that you think about your Judaism would never save you,

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but don't forget that there are blessings that come with your Jewish faith

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that are a great gift.

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And to that extent, we need to remind ourselves of the very same point, don't we?

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Because not one of us is going to be saved by being in a home that raises children in a godly way.

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Coming to church every single day for the whole of your life is not going to save you. You have to come to personal, saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But being in a home, in a church where you are hearing the very words of God is a great blessing,

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and we mustn't take that for advantage either.

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That brings Paul to another objection.

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Don't unfaithful Jews undermine God's faithfulness.

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Don't unfaithful Jews

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who've rejected the Messiah undermine God's faithfulness?

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You see, God's Word didn't just reveal himself to the Jews,

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it also makes great promises for the Jews and describes a great future for God's people. So end of chapter 2. If their disobedience means that they'll be judged and not saved, in the language of verse three, will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?

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Now it pulls doing. Is He shifting the focus? It's going away from the Jews so much, and he's focusing a bit more on God himself,

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and the argument runs a bit like this.

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So Paul, yeah, I understand what you're saying then that

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and

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that there's a difference going on here with how we've understood God's faithfulness. But if, if we just step back for a minute, God's the one who made these promises of blessing.

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And so even if there are some or many Jews who've turned away from those things, actually ultimately isn't the problem God's problem

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because he's the one who made all of these promises?

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See the logic

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and their assumption? The key assumption that matters here

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is that you're measuring God's faithfulness

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by his covenant blessings of his covenant promises of blessing.

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So what Paul is going to go on to show them is that God's promises of blessing are not the only covenant promises that God made to his people.

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And if you're with us last week when we were in Mica, that was exactly the same issue. In Mica's day,

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Mike is false prophets in his day. We're telling all the people, you don't need to worry about any of this serious judgement stuff cause all the things that God promises is people are just blessing and goodness in abundance.

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But those promises are only one side of the coin of God's covenant.

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God's covenant always brings responsibilities for his people, and if they fail to keep their obligations, God would still be just as faithful

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in bringing the covenant curses that he explained at the beginning.

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That's the the problem with this objection that unfaithful Jews undermined God's faithfulness. And Paul's replies really strong in verse four. And I know when we read it in English, we hear not at all. And we think that sounds like the kind of thing that you might hear a posh way to say in a fancy restaurant, you know, Excuse me, Sir. Would you mind if I'm not at all? Sir?

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That's not the emphasis. And the Greek. The Greek is a bit more like

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not on your life,

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not in a million years.

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It is absolutely not possible

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that the ever faithful, always true God would ever, ever be unfaithful.

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Look at the text. Even if every other person on planet earth proves to be a bare faced liar, God is always and can only ever be

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faithful and true.

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Our translation says let God be true. That's not us giving God permission.

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That's Paul saying let it be seen and known that

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God is always faithful

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and always true. And Paul proves this with an example that would have been known to everybody in

his day. He proves that God is going to be faithful even when he judges the unfaithful by pointing them back to King David.

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And hopefully, you know, a good chunk of David's story

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that would be very few people who in one sense would be more Jewish than David.

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David was perhaps one of the greatest kings in Israel's history, and he should have been courageously leading God's people in every sense of that word, should have been leading them in battle, and should have been leading them in moral living. And he failed on both counts.

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He was absent from the battle, saw somebody else's wife that he wanted to sleep with, got her pregnant, and arranged for her husband to be killed on the battle that he should have been fighting in and then tried to cover the whole thing up

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or could have killed him right there in them.

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That God is merciful

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and used a prophet to bring David to see just how sinful and unfaithful he had been.

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And he wrote a number of Psalms immediately after that, one of which Andy read from earlier, Psalm 51, which is where this is quoted from.

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And here is David looking at all of his sin and in all of his brokenness, he says,

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so that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail, when you judge

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the face of all of his unfaithfulness as a Jew confronted with his sin. God says God is proving His faithfulness

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in the way that He judges.

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David's unfaithfulness didn't prove that God was unfaithful. See what he's saying.

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He sees that God is faithful even in judgement as well as in salvation,

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and one of the painful realities that Jews had to realise was that their unfaithfulness towards God's blessings

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indicted them

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and not him.

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Imagine somebody that you know, gets into Eaton College

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overlooking Rugby or Warwick, just picturing somewhere that nobody hopefully will cause any offence. And somebody gets into Eaton and they come from a very wealthy family,

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and they have a huge trust fund that is going to cover every single part of their fees.

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And they sign up for classes with the very best teachers in every subject in this prestigious school.

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And they're unusually bright, right? Like if they're taking the 11 plus they would have got the best score in the entire county.

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Fast forward a few years,

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when it comes to them collecting their GCSE results,

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they have failed all of them.

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Not because they didn't go to a great school,

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not because they didn't have supportive parents, not because they lacked any opportunity.

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They failed because they didn't take advantage of any of the opportunities they had.

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It failed because they refused to do any work

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or imposed language. They were unfaithful to everything they had been given.

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And that, Paul says that's the situation that the Jews were in. Their unfaithfulness didn't prove that God was unfaithful. It proved that they'd been unfaithful

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with what they've been given.

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Now our circumstances are very, very different. We are not in the same position as the Jews today. We don't stand in that same line of those old covenant promises, and we don't have that same history behind us. But we still face the same temptations.

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Every single one of us is still facing the same temptation to define God's faithfulness the way that we want to define it.

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The temptation to think I will only consider God faithful if I receive His blessings

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and His good things in everything that happens in my life.

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But when you read the New Testament,

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it is full

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of similar warnings

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as the Old Covenant was.

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God has always required his people to obey His law.

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He's always required his people to persevere in their faith to the end. So Jesus himself taught his disciples in Luke 18. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded. From the one who's been entrusted with much, much more will be asked

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you get to the Book of Revelation. And what does Jesus say to the church in Ephesus?

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He says there's loads of good stuff that's going on in your church, but you have lost your first love and unless you repent I will remove the lampstand from you.

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There's nothing completely new about this. God has always been explaining to His people that He is always faithful,

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and as He entrusts things to us, He requires us to be faithful too.

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And it's that theme of judgement that takes Paul onto a third objection in verses 5 and six. Doesn't God's judgement

1:12:02

undermine God's justice?

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Look at this five. But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, think about perhaps a famous painting and a great artist could paint lots of the background in dark, dark shadows, but draw light on the very thing that he wants you to focus on. That's what Paul saying here. If our unrighteousness with a dark background brings out God's righteousness more clearly, like the light bit on the painting,

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what should we say?

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That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us

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now at this point in the argument

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polls here is a starting to do some really bizarre philosophical things. In their head,

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they are ignoring the fact they've done anything wrong

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and focusing on God's greater purpose. And their argument is a little bit like this. Yeah, we might have done something wrong, but if God's gonna use all of this

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to advance his own glory, then isn't it wrong that God would punish us for the thing that we've done wrong in the first place?

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So it'd be a bit like somebody doing 60 and a 30

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and they get caught by the police and their defence is yeah, but hang on a minute, if I pay my fine, the government's gonna use it to improve the roads. So it's totally not fair for me to be punished when everything's going to get better as a consequence of what I've done.

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It's like a completely bizarre argument, isn't it? But, but that's what's going on here, and it is bizarre. But I was reminded by one of the writers I read this week. We sinners display incredible ingenuity as we try to justify ourselves.

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Isn't that always true?

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Paul responds to this objection verse four, sorry, with the same level of shock that he uses in verse 4, not on your life. And what he does is he zooms out a bit further and and we need to learn from this. In many ways, chapter 3 is a great apologetics example if you want to understand how to talk to other people who've got questions about the faith. This is a great example of it because you see how Paul responds to different types of questions. And at this point in the argument, what's being said is not in one sense of personal argument. It's a big philosophical

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theoretical argument of, well, let's talk about the grand subject of justice and whether God's judgement is undermining his justice. Well, Paul says, well, if you wanna play that game, let's take a big step back

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and let's ask you a bigger question.

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If you say



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it is wrong for God to ever judge because that would undermine his justice, you are saying God could never, ever, ever judge anyone.

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And Paul says to his audience,

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no one believes that

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it is the hope of all

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of the victims of evil and injustice and sin in the world that come what may in this life. There is a hope to come in the world to come that God will hold all evil accountable.

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And in Paul's day, perhaps less so. Now, not a single one of his Jewish readers would have denied that future hope. That was the universal truth and hope that everybody was holding out for.

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So Paul, Paul's reply boils down to all of that.

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It's a big picture argument that says if you follow that train of thought that somehow God's judgement is going to undermine his justice, what you're gonna do, the conclusion to your argument is you end up with a world that there's no justice at all.

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And it's important, I think, for us to see as Christians. Sometimes we need to help people make that same journey themselves.

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Some of your friends will will try to make clever philosophical arguments that get them off the hook from God's judgement

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and and before we were saved, all of us were doing the same thing.

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Sometimes what we need to help our friends see is what is their conclusion to their argument. If you take God out of that subject

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and you've got nothing to replace it with,

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what you are left with is something that actually will sometimes shock people.

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I watched a fascinating debate between Richard Dawkins and Ian Hersey Ali a few weeks ago. I don't know if her name is familiar to many of you. Ali was born in Somalia and but then moved first to the Netherlands and then to North America

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and she became a key campaigner with the New Atheists.

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She was right at the forefront. You may have heard perhaps people talk about the Four Horsemen of New Atheism. Well, she would have been described as the 5th

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Christopher Hitchens, one of the Four Horsemen, said of Ali that she was the most important public intellectual probably ever to come out of Africa.

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That's how highly

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Hitchens Dawkins considered Ali in her argument. And for years she was campaigning with them, tearing down faith,

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destroying Christianity in the best way that she possibly could.

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At the end of last year, she had something of a conversion experience.

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No, I don't. I've not had an opportunity to hear all of her testimony. I I don't know exactly what she now understands to be true.

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The purpose of the the discussion that I watched was it was the first time that she had debated Richard Dawkins since that experience.

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So her former mentor, who viewed her so highly, is now able to speak to this transformed lady

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about her faith.

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And there's lots of interesting things in the debate. Perhaps the point that was most helpful for me actually connects to verses 5:00 and 6:00,

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because what Ali was saying was for all those years when she had been fighting with Dawkins and Hitchens to try and tear down faith,

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they'd sought to just destroy the argument for theism, for faith in God.

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And she knew as she was doing it,

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the atheism had nothing to plug the gap.

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But they just kept tearing and arguing and destroying in every way that they possibly could.

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When she became converted, if indeed, Lord willing that she has, she came to see why they never filled the gap.

1:18:46

Because atheism has no way

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to fill that void.

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You tear down foundations for truth and justice and hope and have got nothing left and what you leave, says Ali in this interview with Dawkins, is a void

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that is being filled, in her words, with either radical Islam or woke ideology, neither of which, according to Ali. And I believe she's right.

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Give any foundation for hope

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for the generations to come.

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And Paul is using a similar argument here.

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He's looking at his readers and he's saying if you want to make some big theoretical philosophical argument that pulls God out of the picture and leaves you with nothing, you need to see where you're landing.

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You're landing in a place that doesn't pursue truth.

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You're running away from truth, You're leaving hope, and you're leaving any prospect of finding God behind.

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Now if you want to think about that a little bit more, one of my seminary professors wrote a book that I was hoping to have available for you to flick through this morning. I can't find my copy. I may well have lent my copy out to somebody. So if you've got my copy and you've enjoyed it, if you could give it back at some point, that would be lovely. But this book is trying to help people understand what they think their worldview in a really accessible way. It's written a bit like a choose your own adventure. So you read a couple of pages, you then have a choice of different answers and that choice determines which page you go on to and essentially you self diagnose.

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What Your Worldview is, and James wrote this book to try and help people understand what the conclusion to their worldview is

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in the hope that many people would realise

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they don't like the conclusion to their worldview

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and they've come back a few chapters and make different decisions. So I commend that book to you if you think that would be helpful. It's very, very easy to read. Final objection Paul deals with is closely related #4 doesn't my sin bring God glory? Look at verse seven. If God's glory grows as I sin, why am I still condemned?

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That's basically the same argument that he's already made in verses 5 and six. What's different is verse 8. Why not say, as some slanderously claimed, we say, let us do evil, that good may result.

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And when you say it outright,

1:21:24

it's just outrageous, isn't it?

1:21:28

It's no surprise that Paul doesn't respond with a proper argument. He just says their condemnation is just if. If you think you've understood the gospel and that's what you think the gospel says, you have completely misunderstood the whole of the gospel.

1:21:41

And it is brazen.

1:21:43

But that way of thinking has been a struggle for Christians for the whole of the past 2000 years.

1:21:51

Coming out of a very legalistic Judaism,

1:21:55

the idea that Christianity would liberate us

1:21:59

from a salvation based on works just left lots of people thinking, well doesn't therefore mean I can do whatever I like. It's a massive issue, was then, is now,

1:22:09

and it is the issue that Paul's gonna spend time digging into in Chapter 6. So we're gonna wrestle through that in the weeks and months to come. For today, as we close, I want to take you back to the election.

1:22:23

All of the campaigning ends on Thursday.

1:22:27

All of the the, the propaganda as it were, will have been spun

1:22:34

and you have to make a decision.

1:22:38

You will walk into a polling station somewhere and

1:22:42

for all the questions that have been asked of leading politicians,

1:22:46

for all of the answers that they've given as to whether or not what they've been saying really is big and different and, and whether it's actually going to be put into practise,

1:22:56  
you will need to put an X in a box.

1:23:02  
The same is true with the Gospel.

1:23:06  
We can have all sorts of interesting theoretical philosophical discussions

1:23:11  
on the great notions of justice and the reality of the Person of God,

1:23:18  
but in your lifetime, one of two things will happen.

1:23:22  
Either you will die or Jesus will come back,

1:23:29  
and on that day

1:23:31  
the only decision that will matter

1:23:34  
is whether you have trusted in the faithfulness of God,

1:23:40  
in a God who will judge faithfully just as well as he saves faithfully.

1:23:48  
So the greatest question that you need to be sure of tonight, sorry, today is, is not only these big questions that they had to answer in their day, but in one sense the big question that comes out from the whole of the passage,

1:24:02  
which is even though we're unfaithful,

1:24:06  
God's always faithful.

1:24:11  
So do you trust him?

1:24:16

Do you cling to the promises that he has made?

1:24:20

And perhaps a helpful one to close on this morning is this

1:24:25

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

1:24:33

But if we confess our sins, He is faithful

1:24:39

and just

1:24:42

to forgive us our sins

1:24:44

and to purify us from all unrighteousness.

1:24:51

Whenever that day comes,

1:24:53

trust and pray that you would know today you are ready for it. Because God is faithful

1:24:59

to His promise to forgive everyone

1:25:02

who confesses their sin and believes in the Lord Jesus Christ.

1:25:09

We're going to close our service by singing a song that reminds us of the hope we have as Christians to trust God's faithfulness every single moment of every single day. And that's what I want us to rejoice in as we finish in the words of our closing hymn, we're going to remind ourselves that from the breaking of the dawn to the setting of the sun, we will stand on every promise of your words. Words of power strong to save, that will never pass away.

1:25:39

For your covenant assure.

1:25:41

And on this I am secure. I will stand on every promise of your word. Let's stand and sing together.

