

What Advantage? Romans 3:1-20, Psalm 51:1-12

Adapted from: WHAT BENEFIT IS THERE? By Calvin T. Reed, Lebanon Bible Fellowship Church, Lebanon, PA

This winter, we will be meeting with five young people to help them prepare for, one-day soon, standing up and speaking for themselves of their Christian faith. Two of them were previously baptized as infants and three of them will receive believer's baptism; all of them are growing up in the Church. I asked them and their parents to be here today specifically to hear this message and to think about a very important question that it raises and that they need to understand. The question is, "What advantage is there for them—for you—in being baptized or coming to Church?" This is the very question that Paul is asking all of us in today's text.

If you remember, last week in the latter half of Chapter two, Paul very carefully argued that claiming the name (Jew or Christian), or following the rituals, or wearing the badges of faith (circumcision, or baptism) means absolutely nothing to God if this is not backed up by our real faith, because God, who sees what goes on in our hearts, is not fooled by any external show. Paul concludes...

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.
Romans 2:29

Substitute the words "Christian" and "baptism" and now you have the challenge that we Christians must face.

Next, Paul asks what seems to be an obvious question with an obvious answer. What advantage then is there in being Jewish or Christian; or what benefit in growing up in the Synagogue or Church? If such things as membership and baptism give us no advantages with God, what is the advantage for us? And before you say "apparently none," Paul himself answers: "**actually quite a lot.**"

Then what advantage has the Jew?
Or what is the value of circumcision?

Much, in every way! (3:1)

So that is the question we will explore today. **What advantage do we have in our relationship to God by being baptized and growing up in a Church?**

The answer is, "**More than you think. But not what you think.**"

What benefit is there in growing up in a Christian home if that doesn't guarantee that you are a Christian? What benefit is there in baptism (either infant or believers) if that doesn't assure your salvation?"

Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the [very words] of God. (3:2)

Now the NRSV translation says the "oracles of God," but what is an oracle and who uses that word anymore? A better translation is that "...**the Jews, and we, have been entrusted with the very words of God.**" Paul says that while there are many advantages in being raised as a good Jewish boy, or a good Christian girl, the most important one is that we have had the privilege of hearing the very words of God. Notice that "word" (oracles) is plural, Paul is not talking about the Jews or us just having access to a Bible but rather that we have had the privilege of actually learning what God wants us to know. The book of Hebrews opens with these words

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son... Hebrews 1:1-2

What is the advantage in God speaking directly first to the Jews and now to us Christians?

If you remember in Romans chapter one, we learned that everyone ever born has had access to the truths of God to some degree because of the way God originally designed us. We have both the ability to recognize His handiwork in the world around us and a basic instinct for morality (*these days we would say that we have "a specific God-socket on our mother board and moral firmware—a built-in moral code"*).

So, when we look at creation we see evidence of God that should draw us to Himself, so much so that we are without excuse if we try to ignore God. And since everyone instinctively understands to some degree what is right or wrong, we are equally guilty when we knowingly do things that are wrong. The fact is that God built every one of us this way: to cause us to go looking for God and to yearn for a life lived in relationship with Him. We all have a built in heavenly homing instinct and that's good; because God wants us to find our way home.

But what an advantage, what a leap forward it is to have God now reveal Himself to us in a way that we could never understand by looking at creation alone. Yes, Psalm 19

says," *The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*" But there are things that you cannot learn about God just by looking at the stars. And yes, our consciences can reveal to us a sense of right and wrong, but there is no way our consciences can come to the same kinds of conclusions and understanding that we do from learning the Ten Commandments.

So there are many blessings associated with growing up in a Jewish/Christian home. The greatest of these is being exposed to the very Words of God, the benefit of learning, while still a child, about who God is and what God wants for us and from us as His children.

We need to realize how tremendously blessed we are to grow up as Christians, and especially now as Christians living in the United States, because we have been blessed in having the Words of God in over abundance.

As Christians our blessing are now greater because we possess the complete Word of God. While the Jews had a major portion of God's Word, we have been given the full revelation of God. There is a progressive aspect to God's revelation. His Word does not change, but His gospel plan unfolds and is made increasingly clear with each page of Scripture. **Adam and Eve** only knew that her "seed" would one day crush the serpent's head. **Abraham** only knew that one of his son's would bless the world. Isaiah knew that this one would be named "*wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*" (Isaiah 9:6), But we know that

when the fullness of time had come,
God sent his Son, born of a woman,
born under the law, in order to redeem
those who were under the law, so that we
might receive adoption as children
(Galatians 4:4-5)

Furthermore, as the Book of Hebrews points out, as Christians, our blessing is greater because we also possess the Word of God with greater clarity. The Old Testament prophets could not clearly see all the applications of the prophecies they spoke. We have had those prophecies not only explained to us by Jesus and his apostles, but also carried into our heart by the Holy Spirit. Like that time in the Synagogue when Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll and then told his audience that "*today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*" (Isaiah 61, Luke 4:22)

Thirdly, as modern American Christians, our blessing is greater because we now have amazing access to the Words of God. Old Testament saints did not have easy access to the word of God. Prior to the time of Moses there was no written word of God. And in the time of King David, though the word of God was written it was mostly kept in the

Temple and occasionally read–out loud–to the people. In Jesus’ day, if his town was lucky enough to possess a Torah Scroll, a literate Jew could walk to the Synagogue to read God’s words.

Now we have the words of God available everywhere and in every form. We have access to a variety of translations which reflect a choice in reading levels. Most families have multiple copies of the Bible in their home so that family members do not even need to share. The Bible is available in various sizes so that it can be carried in a pocket or purse. It is available in large print for those with poor eyesight, brail for those with no eyesight, and in audio versions for those who prefer to listen rather than read. I even have a Bible app on my smart phone–accessing the very words of God has never been easier.

However, Paul is not just focusing on having access to the Word of God but on having religious training. What a great advantage to be instructed by the Word of God, to have God explained to you by a wise elder. Religious training is the advantage that the Jew then and the Christian now, has over everyone else. We have been taught, from His own self-revelation, who God is. We have learned of our need for a righteousness that only God could provide and the only way that righteousness could be obtained is by faith in the completed work of His son Jesus.

So the Jews knew God and God’s expectations of them from His very intimate self-revelation to them and His Covenant agreement with them. That is their advantage. But, what if some Jews did not believe? Does this mean that God has been unfaithful to His covenant promises or that He failed in bringing to fruition His covenant promises? No, both they and you can easily read that along with promised blessings for keeping their covenant, there was also promised cursing for them if they abandoned the covenant (Deuteronomy 30).

So, what if some of our children do not believe? What happens if a child grows up in a Christian home but never professes faith in Jesus Christ? What happens if those adults, who as children were raised in church, then leave the Church and become inactive in their faith? Has God been unfaithful to His promise? Has God been unfaithful to His word? Is God to be faulted? That is what verse three now asks us ...

What if some were unfaithful?
Will their faithlessness nullify the
faithfulness of God?

3:3

This might seem a strange question, until we understand that in Jesus’ day, the Jews taught that their children would be saved simply because they were Jews and that circumcision was the only badge needed to prove their faithfulness to the covenant.

Since Paul has just written that not every circumcised Jew would be saved, his readers might have concluded that God had lied and did not keep His word. Such a conclusion may seem a little farfetched until we realize that we Christians have long done the same thing. While Catholic theology may now be changing, up until recently the Catholic Church taught that the act of the Priest baptizing an infant is that which saved that infant; that is why the event is called "christening" (Christianizing). Until your child was baptized, they were not saved. After your child was baptized they were saved.

While that is one of the Church's abuses that the Protestants protested--and Protestant Churches don't teach that--you would be very surprised to learn how many supposedly Protestant but non-churchgoing Christians still do believe this. They quickly seek out a Church that will baptize their baby-- and then again are they seen in church, until the next baby is born. And how many Protestant Churches still erroneously imply that infant baptism contains the promise that God will save this child.

So, like being circumcised and raised Jewish, being baptized and raised Christian is to your great advantage if you live out what you have heard and learned--the very words of God--by trusting Christ as your savior and continuing to grow in your faith. But if you reject or neglect what you have been taught then it offers you no advantage at all; but rather--before God--probably even a greater condemnation; another Biblically taught principle applies here that *to whom much has been given, much will be required* (Luke 12:48).

When Paul wrote this to the Jewish people he got more than a little push back. "*How dare you say that my child who has been circumcised is not right with God?*" And from some Christians, "*What do you mean that my child who has been baptized isn't guaranteed heaven?*"

Let's look at the question again: "What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?" The answer comes in verse four ...

By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, (3:4)
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Specifically Paul is saying, anyone who teaches that God guarantees the salvation of those who are Jewish or those who are circumcised is lying about God's promises. And similarly those who think that a person is saved simply because they grew up in a Christian home or because they have been baptized as an infant is completely misunderstanding God's promises. We must acknowledge God's justice and our sinfulness when we are judged. And in support of this, our need for personal honesty before God, Paul next quotes King David...

as it is written, "*So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging.*" (Romans 3:4 - Psalm 51:4)

Psalm 51 is David's response to God after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his sin of having committed adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband murdered. Paul often uses David as an example because the Jewish people venerated David. Paul asks, what did David say about God's condemnation of his sin? What does David do when Nathan says, "you are that man!?" David says, "God is true. God's word is true. I have sinned."

And so, we should also reply to what Romans is trying to teach us: *God's word is true, I'm not saved because I have been baptized; I'm not saved because I have been brought up in a Christian home. I'm saved because I have put my faith and trust in Jesus Christ.*

So what is our take home for today?

When children grow up in a Christian home and are instructed in the Word of God, are prayed for, and are taught how to live their faith, if they then fail to believe the truth, whose fault is it? It's theirs. They have not taken advantage of the great privileges they have been given.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

For no human being will be justified in His sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for **through the law** comes the **knowledge of sin.**

Romans 3: 19-20

What advantage is there in being dedicated as a child, in growing up in a Christian home, in attending church regularly? Answer—you hear the Word of God, you learn who God is, you find out that you are a sinner, that you need forgiveness, and that by

God's grace—this forgiveness comes through Jesus Christ and Him alone. And you learn that you need to personally place your faith in Jesus Christ.

If you fail to believe this good news, or as many do—take for granted this Good News and walk away from the faith in which you have grown up—then the responsibility lies solely and squarely on your shoulders. If you don't believe, who is to blame? It's not God. It's not the church. It's not other Christians, sinful though they may be.

There is no justification for unbelief and nothing teaches us this better than having been privileged, advantaged, to hear and learn the very Words of God.

Amen?