

**Q. Romans 5:18 says that by Christ's one act of righteousness, all men were justified. Does this mean that everyone is saved?**

A. In Romans 5:18, Paul is comparing the result of Adam's sin to the result of Jesus' atonement: "So then as through one trespass, all men were condemned; even so through one act of righteousness, all men were justified to life" (*World English Bible*, WEB—used throughout unless otherwise noted). This verse is often cited by Universalists to support their belief that all humans will be saved. Certainly, taken by itself, it does indeed sound like Paul is teaching that, because of what Jesus has done, everyone has been justified and will receive eternal life. But is this the conclusion we will reach when we examine the verse in context? What is Paul saying in Romans 5:18?

### **The Context Leading up to Romans 5:18**

The first Christians in Rome were probably Jewish. Possibly, they were among the Jews from various parts of the empire who heard Peter speak on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. From the issues addressed by Paul in Romans, we can conclude that, like many Jewish Christians, they had trouble fully comprehending Jesus' fulfilling and ending of the law. The Christian community in Rome apparently carried on with many Jewish practices, such as believing in the necessity—or at least the superiority—of circumcision, the keeping of days, and adherence to dietary laws. Gentile Christians, who had never been under the Old Testament law, also eventually came into the assembly in Rome, but they were dominated by the more numerous Jews.

In an edict issued around A.D. 49, Roman Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from the city of Rome. The edict did not discriminate between Christian and non-Christian Jews, so even the Christian Jews had to leave. But the edict did not include the Gentile Christians. They stayed behind in Rome. This expulsion of the Jews is mentioned in Acts 18:2.

After some years, the edict was either withdrawn or allowed to lapse with the death of Claudius in A.D. 54. When the Jewish Christians

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returned to Rome, they found that the Christian community had gone on without them and was now Gentile in character. These Gentile Christians did not want a return to Jewish ways. This resulted in friction, and one of the main reasons Paul wrote his letter to the Romans was to ease the tension between the Jewish and Gentile Roman Christians. He wanted to show that neither side of the dispute was superior to the other. He especially concentrates on showing the Jewish Christians that the law did not make them better than the Gentiles and that, in fact, reliance on the law for righteousness was the cause of the fall of the unconverted Jewish nation.

In Romans 1:16-17, Paul clearly states, "For I am not ashamed of the Good News of Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes; for the Jew first, and also for the Greek. For in it is revealed God's righteousness from faith to faith. As it is written, 'But the righteous shall live by faith.'"

In Romans 2, Paul says that people relying on the law are inherently hypocrites. They look at others and condemn them, not realizing that they are also breaking the law (2:1-6). They try to teach others to keep the law, but break the very points of the law they teach (2:19-25). Both of the classes of people that the world consists of—Jew and Gentile—are equally condemned, either with the law or without the law, because even those without the law are a law to themselves (2:14-16). Paul then gives the New Covenant definition of a Jew:

If therefore the uncircumcised keep the ordinances of the law, won't his uncircumcision be accounted as circumcision? Won't the uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfills the law, judge you, who with the letter and circumcision are a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit not in the letter; whose praise is not from men, but from God.

Romans 2:26-29

By saying these things, Paul has slapped the Jews down to the same level as anyone else on the earth. This is a bitter blow to them. Paul softens it somewhat at the beginning of chapter 3 by saying that they have an advantage because God committed to them "the oracles of God" (3:1-2), the Old Testament Scriptures. But he quickly levels the playing field again by saying, "What then? Are we better than they?"

No, in no way. For we previously warned both Jews and Greeks, that they are all under sin. As it is written, 'There is no one righteous; no, not one'" (3:9-10). We often use the verses that follow as evidence of the total depravity of all humanity. And so they are. But Paul is using these verses specifically to say to the Jews that no individual or class of people—not even the Jews—is righteous. All are sinners under just condemnation. The Jews prattle against the Gentiles as guilty, but the law exposes the Jews as also guilty. Thus, the entire world is guilty before God—Gentile and Jew, and this fact should stop the condemning mouths of the Jews (3:19, see our Romans 3:19 article for more information [http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/romans3\\_19qa.htm](http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/romans3_19qa.htm)).

Paul then makes statements that might be considered to be the core of his argument:

Because by the works of the law, no flesh will be justified in his sight. For through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the law, a righteousness of God has been revealed, being testified by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all those who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 3:20-23

Now, it is true that every individual person has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But, from the context, it is obvious that Paul intends "all" here to mean the two classes that together form all of humanity—those born under the law and those not born under the law, the Jews and the Gentiles. This theme is again clear in verses 29 and 30: "Or is God the God of Jews only? Isn't he the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith, and the uncircumcised through faith." This idea of the two classes is essential to understanding the letter to the Romans.

Paul then goes on to say, "Do we then nullify the law through faith? May it never be! No, we establish the law" (3:31). Does this mean that we are still under the law? No! It simply means the law is established as true because it testifies that, "apart from the law, a righteousness of God has been revealed" (3:21). He then goes on in chapter 4 to cite the example of Abraham. The account of Abraham is found in the Old Testament, which is also called the law. Thus the Old Testament—the law—testifies that righteousness is found through faith, apart from law-keeping. Abraham became the father of the faithful of both classes

of people, the circumcised and the uncircumcised (see especially 4:11-12).

Romans 5 is not an anomaly. In it, Paul continues with the same theme of looking at all men as falling into one of two classes of people: the Jews under the law and the Gentiles without the law. Both classes are condemned as sinners, but from both classes come the children of faith who are justified by faith and have peace with God through Jesus Christ (5:1).

Thus, Paul says, "Therefore, as sin entered into the world through one man, and death through sin; and so death passed to all men, because all sinned" (5:12). Remember, he is looking at the world as consisting of those under the law and those without the law, so this is what he means by "all men." Notice this view of the world coming out in the following verses: "For until the law, sin was in the world; but sin is not charged when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those whose sins weren't like Adam's disobedience, who is a foreshadowing of him who was to come" (5:13-14). In other words, just as Paul has already explained that those living in his time without the law are condemned without the law, so also those who lived before the coming of the law were also condemned with death. Adam's sin was a transgression of law. He was given one command and he broke it. Those who followed Adam did not sin in the same way he did—they didn't have a command to break. They fall into the class of people without the law. But they were still condemned.

As Paul explains at the end of verse 14, Adam was a foreshadowing or type (Greek—*tupos*) of Jesus Christ. He elaborates on this in the verses leading up to verse 18. And then in Romans 5:18, the verse in question, he states: "So then as through one trespass, all men were condemned; even so through one act of righteousness, all men were justified to life."

Given the context, then, it is completely reasonable to expand this verse as follows: So then just as through Adam's one trespass all men—the class under the law and the class without the law—were condemned; even so through Jesus Christ's one act of righteousness, all men—the class under the law and the without the law—were justified to life. Does Paul mean that every individual in both classes is justified? No. Because in speaking of Abraham, he has already explained that "faith is accounted for righteousness" (Romans 4:5). Still speaking of faith, he writes, "Therefore it also was 'reckoned to

him [Abraham] for righteousness.' Now it was not written that it was accounted to him for his sake alone, but for our sake also, to whom it will be accounted, who believe in him who raised Jesus, our Lord, from the dead, who was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification" (Romans 4:22-25).

It so happens that death, coming upon both classes of people has come upon every individual because everyone has sinned. But righteousness, although it does not discriminate between the two classes of people, is not imputed to every individual because not everyone believes. Notice Romans 3:21-22 again: "But now apart from the law, a righteousness of God has been revealed, being testified by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all those who believe. For there is no distinction." All have sinned, but only those who believe are counted righteous.

### **After Romans 5:18**

In Romans 5:19, Paul mirrors the thought of verse 18 but now applies it to many individuals: "For as through the one man's disobedience many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one, many will be made righteous." Paul then goes on to explain to the Jewish Christians especially how we are not under the law, but under grace and how being freed from the law frees us from sin and makes us the servants of righteousness. In chapter 7, he teaches that we have become dead to the law. He continues this issue until chapter 9 where he addresses the subject of national Israel. Here he expresses his sorrow over Israel. Why sorrow? Because, as he asserts beginning with verses 7 and 8, "Neither, because they are Abraham's seed, are they all children. But, 'In Isaac will your seed be called.' That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as a seed." Being in the class of humanity that is under the law, that is, being a Jew or Israelite, does not automatically save anyone. Because of this, many Jews will not attain righteousness. "Why? Because they didn't seek it by faith, but as it were by works of the law. They stumbled over the stumbling stone; even as it is written, 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and a rock of offense; and no one who believes in him will be disappointed'" (Romans 9:32-33).

Can you see that Paul's sorrow over the fact that many Israelites have not obtained righteousness because they sought it through the law and not by faith proves that in Romans 5:18, he could not possibly have

meant that every individual will be justified? He continues in Romans 10:1, "Brothers, my heart's desire and my prayer to God is for Israel, that they may be saved." What need would there be for this prayer that they MAY be saved if everyone is automatically saved? There would be no need for Paul to be sorrowful or for him to pray for anyone's salvation.

In chapter 11, Paul writes, "I ask then, did God reject his people? May it never be! For I also am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin" (11:1). Does this mean that God is going to save every Israelite? Not at all. It only means that He has not wholesale cast every single one of them away. The entire class is not rejected. Israel, the Jews, those born under the law will, as a class of people, have some who will be saved.

Paul gives the example of Elijah. He thought he was the only one faithful to God. But God told him that He had seven thousand who had remained faithful. "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (verse 5). A remnant! A remnant is not everyone. The salvation of a remnant directly contradicts the doctrine of the universal salvation of everyone. And notice that it is by the election of grace. Only those whom God has elected to salvation will be saved: "What then? That which Israel seeks for, that he didn't obtain, but the chosen ones obtained it, and the rest were hardened" (verse 7). Salvation is entirely by God's sovereign grace. He chooses some for salvation and He hardens the rest.

### **Universalism Is a False Gospel**

The Bible proves Universalism to be a foolish doctrine of those who have been blinded to the truth and do not know the Scriptures. It is a false Gospel and a very old one. It was first preached by the serpent in the Garden of Eden: "You won't surely die" (Genesis 3:4). It is a doctrine that leads to complacency and a false sense of security. Universalists would have us believe that people can enter the sheepfold some other way, but Jesus says these are thieves and robbers (John 10:1). Jesus teaches, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up in the last day" (John 6:44), "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me" (John 14:6), and, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through him. He who believes in him is not judged. He who

doesn't believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God" (John 3:16-18). Yes, those who believe have eternal life, but those who do not believe are judged. In this way, the world—both classes of people, Jews and Gentiles, but not every individual—is saved. Universalism is proved false.

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