

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 2: 17-18

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time to read the bible again. This week, we are going to read Romans Chapter 2:17-29; today, we'll read verses 17 and 18.

Paul said that the gospel of God is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes. Following this, Paul very practically tells us how God saves us who are willing to believe. The first step of salvation is that God sent His only beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to accomplish the judicial redemption for us. Since this concerns legal matters, it is as if in a universal courtroom—every detail of the redemption must conform to the righteous laws of God and must withstand the scrutiny of God's adversary, Satan, as well as the angels and all mankind.

There are two crucial aspects to redemption. The first is: who are the ones being saved? Is there any case where someone's sin is too great to be saved? The second aspect concerns the qualifications and work of the Savior—do they meet the righteous requirements of God's law? In Romans 1:18 to 3:20, Paul first answers the question concerning the first aspect.

Paul uses two measures—godliness toward God and righteousness toward people—to categorize mankind into four types. God's purpose is that, through His plan of redemption, man may attain a state of godliness toward God and righteousness toward others. In this way, man not only returns to God's original intention in creation but, because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, can partake in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth to come, and dwell with God forever.

The remaining three types all need to go through the salvation of Jesus Christ in order to attain the state of godliness toward God and righteousness toward people. Paul begins with those who are ungodly and unrighteous, and he brings out the three stages in which God, in His mercy, gives them over—along with the

increasingly degraded condition of man. If a person heeds God's warning and is willing to repent, he can escape the outcome of eternal destruction.

Next, Paul speaks about those who like to judge others. They do not know God, nor do they worship Him, and as a result, they lack an absolute standard of value. Yet they think themselves better than others and enjoy criticizing and judging those who fall short of their standards. They are a group of self-righteous people. Toward these ungodly yet self-righteous individuals, Paul directly points out that God judges according to truth—that is, according to the life and conduct of God's Son, Jesus Christ, on earth, as the absolute standard. All who fall short of this standard will be condemned, and God has already appointed a day of judgment, when everyone will be repaid according to their deeds—first the Jews, then the Gentiles.

Now Paul begins to address the final group—namely, the Jews. They are God's chosen people in the Old Testament, those who ought to know God and worship Him. If they were truly godly toward God, they would listen to His word and walk in His ways. However, Jewish history is full of corruption and rebellion. God sent many prophets who repeatedly warned this stiff-necked people, but they would not listen. As a result, they fell into national ruin and were scattered among all the nations.

In the New Testament, God made a completely new beginning. Grace still came to the Jews first, but they clung tightly to their Jewish identity and were unwilling to repent and receive grace, thus becoming people who had only an outward appearance of godliness but lacked the reality of it. Because they did not have the true essence of godliness, many unrighteous situations arose among them. They were a group of falsely godly and unrighteous people.

Paul himself was also a Jew. He had deep affection for his fellow countrymen and sincerely hoped they could be saved, so he spent much time discussing the Jews. From Romans 2:17 to 3:8, this week we are only reading 2:17–29, which includes the negative condition of the Jews. Then in chapter 3, verses 1 to 8, Paul presents a balanced view by pointing out the strengths of the Jews. The saints in the New Testament have the status of being God's children. If they cannot live out a life that reflects that status, then they are just like the Jews—having only the outward form

but lacking the inward reality. Paul's condemnation of the Jews also serves as a warning to the saints of the New Testament.

Verse 17: "Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God"

You call yourself a Jew—the word "call" here refers to claiming a title in name only. You call yourself a Jew, meaning that you are a Jew merely in name. We know that in the book of Genesis, Jacob had twelve sons, and God changed Jacob's name to Israel. His twelve sons became the twelve tribes of Israel, and they inherited the promises God gave to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thus becoming God's chosen people in the Old Testament.

So, when did the Israelites start being called Jews? Historians have discussed this extensively, but there is no unanimous conclusion. However, the generally accepted point in time is during the return from exile. The northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C. In 2 Kings 17:6, it says: "In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria and carried Israel away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah and by the Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes." The ten tribes of the kingdom of Israel were uprooted and settled in foreign cities. From then on, those ten tribes gradually disappeared from the stage of history.

The southern kingdom of Judah was also destroyed, in 586 B.C., by the Babylonian Empire. In 2 Chronicles 36:19–20, it says: "Then they burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions. And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia." Thus, the two tribes of the kingdom of Judah—Judah and Benjamin—were also taken captive to the city of Babylon. Later, the Persian Empire rose up and replaced the Babylonian Empire. The Persian king Cyrus was stirred up by God and permitted the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the house of God.

Ezra 2:1 says, “Now these are the people of the province who came back from the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his own city.” This refers to the first wave of the returning remnant, led by Zerubbabel. They returned to the land of Judah to rebuild the temple. The returning remnant was mainly from the tribe of Judah.

After that, there was a second wave of return led by Ezra, to restore the service of the priesthood; and a third wave led by Nehemiah, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. These two waves of return were also primarily composed of people from the tribe of Judah. From that point onward, the title “Jews” gradually replaced “Israelites.”

According to Jewish tradition regarding return and identity, children born of Jewish women were considered Jews; for the mother was responsible for teaching her children the Jewish law. A godly mother could raise godly children. Paul’s young co-worker Timothy is the best example. His father was a Greek, but his mother and grandmother were devout Jewish women. Paul says this in 2 Timothy 1:5: “When I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.” Paul was fully convinced that Timothy’s family upbringing nurtured his faith in God.

“You call yourself a Jew” expresses how the Jews took pride in their lineage. They relied on the law and boasted in God. They considered themselves God’s chosen people, and God had indeed given them the Law. Especially in the Torah, the ceremonial parts—such as the ordinances of worship, dietary laws, and feasts—served to distinguish them from the Gentiles.

Generally speaking, the Jews hold firmly to four great treasures to prove that they are distinct and that they are God’s chosen people. These four treasures are: First, the Law—not just the laws recorded in the Old Testament, but especially the 613 regulations listed in detail through the compilation and organization of Jewish rabbis. These regulations govern the daily lives of the Jews, and they are thoroughly familiar with them. Second, circumcision—every Jewish male is circumcised on the eighth day after birth. This is a mark in their flesh, signifying that they are God’s

people. Third, the Sabbath—to avoid violating the Sabbath, the rabbis established many regulations that specify the kinds of work Jews are forbidden to do on that day. Fourth, the temple and sacrificial system—the ceremonial ordinances concerning offerings and worship. In this verse, Paul mentions only the Law, because the Law is the foundation of Jewish identity, and the regulations regarding circumcision, the Sabbath, and sacrifices are all included within the Law.

Verse 18: “and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law.”

The Law is a testimony of God. God is holy and righteous; and the purpose of the Law is to protect God’s people from violating His holy and righteous nature. As Jewish people grow up, they all go through a coming-of-age ceremony, making them a “son” or “daughter” of the Law. This shows that they all know the Law. Since they have been instructed from the Law, they should understand the will of God. The word “understand” comes from the Greek word *ginosko*, which refers to knowledge obtained through learning and experience. In other words, if they truly understand God’s Law, they will be able to know God’s will. The word for “will” in Greek is *thelēma*—from *thelō*, meaning “desire” or “wish.” When the suffix *-ma* is added, it indicates God’s best desire—His will.

The Law is God's testimony. If someone earnestly studies God's testimony, they will come to know the original intent behind these testimonies—namely, the excellent will in God's heart. The Jews have a unique advantage because they possess the Law of God in their hands. They are in a position to understand God’s will and to discern right from wrong. The Chinese Union Version does a somewhat poor job translating this, importing Chinese concepts of morality into the text. The NIV translation follows the original Greek more closely with “approve of what is superior,” meaning to discern and delight in the better things of God.

All things that align with God's will are better things, because they are part of the good intention God determined from the beginning in His creation. Man, because of the fall, has darkened thoughts and can no longer see God's will—thus follows

his own selfish desires, resulting in today's corrupt conditions. The Jews, holding the Law in their hands, are able to understand God's will and discern what pleases Him. Therefore, they can both know and seek out the good things that are according to God's heart.

But this does not mean that they actually live accordingly—and this is precisely why Paul condemned the Jews: they possessed the Law, yet could not live out what is according to God's heart. In fact, isn't this also true of today's saints? We are God's chosen people under the New Covenant. When we believe and receive Jesus Christ, we gain God's life and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Compared to the Jews, we have even greater access to know God's will directly and to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit more directly.

If we are willing to humble ourselves and listen to the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit, we will realize that every single thing God allows to happen to us is His excellent will—His best arrangement for us. Then we will be able to receive it with joy.

However, if we only have the outward appearance of being God's children but lack the inward reality—having no subjective experience of God and unable to follow the leading of the Spirit—then we become nothing more than religious people. The words Paul spoke in condemnation of the Jews will also be applied to us. May the Lord preserve us.

Let us pray together: Dear Lord, help us to see what an honor it is to become children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. We can know God's will, and we can delight in what is better. We ask You to adjust our vision, that we may turn from the temporal to the eternal, from the material to the spiritual—so that we may recognize that everything that happens to us is Your best arrangement. What we perceive as loss is only temporary, but what we gain through the loss is eternal blessing. Lord, adjust our perspective so that we may fix our eyes on Jesus Christ and live a life that is worthy of being called a child of God. Bless my daily life, in Jesus Christ's holy name I pray. Amen!