

Lesson 28 at StudyRomans.org

Handout for Lesson 28

What is the greatest archaeological discovery of all time? We might point to the Rosetta Stone, or King Tut's tomb, or perhaps the city of Troy. But in my opinion the great archeological discovery of all time is the one shown on the Handout for Lesson 28 — the Dead Sea Scrolls. And particularly the Great Isaiah Scroll, which is shown completely rolled out near the top of the Handout. Two of the pages in the scroll are circled in red and shown much larger below the rolled out scroll. And we will have something to say about each of the passages later in this lesson.

But, for now, just think for a moment about the discovery of that scroll of Isaiah. When it was found it moved the clock back 1000 years earlier than the oldest known copy that we had prior to that discovery. And when we think of the scroll dating from 125 BC, we should think about another copy of Isaiah dating about 100 years later — one that we no longer have but that we can still read about. In Luke 4, Jesus was handed a scroll of Isaiah from which he read a prophecy about himself! That scroll likely looked much like the one you see on the Handout.

And when this Great Scroll was found it instantly discredited countless crazy views about the Bible that had bubbled up in universities all around the world. For example, some taught that the Hebrew Bible we now have was nothing like the Hebrew Bible before the time of Christ, others taught that the Psalms had been written during the Maccabean period, others taught that the gospel of John was heav-

ily influenced by Greek thought, while others taught that the book of Daniel was written in the second century BC. Not a single one of those theories survived this discovery in 1947. They were all proved wrong — but more on that later.

Romans 2:23

Romans 2:23 — You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.

Verse 23 is the grand climax of Paul’s diatribe about the law: You boast in the law, but you dishonor God by breaking the law. You say one thing, but you do another. And Paul has just proved that point with multiple examples of how they are guilty of that hypocrisy.

Paul has already told us that these people were boastful — back in verse 17, he said they boasted in God. And now in verse 23, we again see that they are boastful — but here we see a significant difference. Now they are boasting, not in God, but in the Law. The Law has replaced God as the source of their boasting. And rather than boasting in God as we saw in verse 17, they are dishonoring God here in verse 23.

And how did they break the law? Paul just gave us three examples — they broke the seventh commandment, they broke the eighth commandment, and they broke the first commandment by breaking the commandment in Deuteronomy 7 against robbing temples. The Greek word translated “breaking” means going beyond a fixed boundary — and here in verse 23 that fixed boundary was the Law of Moses.

Verse 23 says that the Jews were **dishonoring** God. That charge reminds us of the charge against the **Gentiles** in the previous chapter — they also did not honor God (verse 21), but instead they dishonored their own bodies (verse 24), and so God gave them up to dishonorable passions (verse 26).

And that similarity reminds us of Paul's main point here — the Jews and the Gentiles were in the same boat. By boasting in the Law and then breaking the Law, the Jews found themselves in the same boat as the Gentiles — they were all guilty of failing to honor God. They were all sinners — all lawbreakers.

So far, Paul has proved that point as to the Jews by giving us examples of how they broke the law — but Paul will also prove that point by citing the Old Testament Scriptures, as we will see in the next verse.

Romans 2:24

Romans 2:24 — For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

As it is written — but where? Where is it written? Let's start by looking at two possibilities:

Isaiah 52:5 — Now therefore what have I here,” declares the LORD, “seeing that my people are taken away for nothing? Their rulers wail,” declares the LORD, “and continually all the day my name is despised.

Ezekiel 36:20 — But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in

that people said of them, ‘These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.’

Neither of those verses is an exact match, but we get much closer to the text in verse 24 when we read that first option, not from the ESV, but from the Septuagint.

The Septuagint is the Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament that was translated in the third and second centuries BC. The word Septuagint comes from the Latin phrase for “The Old Testament from the version of the Seventy Translators,” and it is sometimes abbreviated as LXX, the Roman number for seventy.

Here is how the Septuagint translates Isaiah 52:5, which is shown on the Handout below the translation from the Great Scroll of Isaiah.

Isaiah 52:5 (Septuagint) — “And now why are you here?” This is what the Lord says: “Because my people were taken for nothing, be impressed and wail.” This is what the Lord says: “Because of you my name is always blasphemed among the nations.”

As we can see, the final phrase from the Septuagint translation is very close to what we read earlier in verse 24.

- **Romans 2:24** (ESV) — “The name of God is blasphemed **among the Gentiles because of you.**”
- **Isaiah 52:5** (Septuagint) — “**Because of you** my name is always blasphemed **among the nations.**”

But it is quite different from Isaiah 52:5 in the ESV.

- **Isaiah 52:5 (ESV)** — “And continually all the day my name is despised.”

Notice that two phrases in verse 24 (“because of you” and “among the Gentiles”) are not found in the ESV translation of Isaiah 52:5 but that both of those phrases are found in the Septuagint translation of that same verse. That observation answers one difficult question but simultaneously creates another difficult question.

The question it answers is the source of the quotation. Yes, verse 24 sounds a bit like two different passages in the ESV — but verse 24 is almost an exact quotation from the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 52:5. And so it is very clear that Paul was quoting Isaiah 52:5 from the Septuagint when he penned Romans 2:24.

But that raises another question — why is the Septuagint so different from the ESV when it comes to Isaiah 52:5? And we should add that this difference is not the only such example — we could point to many other differences between the ESV and the Septuagint. And the reason for those differences is two-fold: different sources and interpretative expansion.

As for the different sources, the ESV is based on a Hebrew text that was standardized between 600 and 1000 AD. The Septuagint, by contrast, was a Greek translation made between 200 and 300 years BC. And so some of the differences in Isaiah 52:5 may have come from the use of a different version of Isaiah that we no longer have.

That’s possible, but I think the second reason is the more likely cause for the differences that we see here — and that second reason is interpretative expansion.

The Septuagint sometimes makes **explicit** things that are only **implicit** in the original text. And apparently, for whatever reason, that sort of interpretative expansion occurred more often in Isaiah than in other books of the Old Testament.

For example, in Isaiah 52:5 we see that God's name is being blasphemed — but who is doing that, and why are they doing that? The text does not explicitly answer those questions, but if the Septuagint translators believed that the text implicitly answered those questions, then they might have just inserted those answers into the text. That is the most likely reason why we see this particular difference between the Septuagint and the ESV because there is no known Hebrew manuscript that includes these two missing phrases.

Is interpretive expansion a good way to translate something? It is not. The goal of a translation should be to show us the underlying language as clearly as possible in our own language. Interpretive expansion should be saved for the commentaries. But, while adding your own explanation to the translation is wrong, that does not mean that the explanation you added is wrong. Your explanation could be the right explanation!

Is that what happened here? After all, the New Testament frequently refers to the Septuagint. Does that mean that all of the explanations added in the Septuagint are correct? No, it does not. We know it does not.

Look again at the Handout for Lesson 28. Isaiah 9:6 is the great prophecy about Jesus where we are told that “his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” But the Septuagint, apparently uncomfortable with apply-

ing such lofty descriptions to a man, changed Isaiah 9:6 to instead read “his name is called Messenger of the Great Council.”

But maybe that is what Isaiah 9:6 really says. Maybe the text we have today that points so clearly to Christ was added after the time of Christ. Wrong and wrong!

Yes, there have been some who made that argument, but no one has made that argument after 1947. Why? Because that is the year the Great Isaiah Scroll was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Isaiah 9:6 in that scroll reads just like it does in our modern English translations and nothing at all like what we find in the Septuagint. (Again, you can see the actual text from the scroll on the Handout for Lesson 28 along with both the translation of the scrolls and the translation of the Septuagint.)

And so the Septuagint translators did not always make the right choice when they added an explanation to the text — but did the Septuagint translators *sometimes* make the right choice? Yes, they certainly did. We know that they did.

And how do we know that for sure? We know that for sure because the Holy Spirit tells us that right here in Romans 2:24. When Paul quotes Isaiah 52:5 and includes these two additions added by the Septuagint, inspiration confirms that those two additions are correct additions. Paul confirms that the Septuagint’s view of Isaiah 52:5 was the correct view.

God’s name was being blasphemed in Isaiah 52:5. Why and by whom? The Septuagint inserted answers to both of those questions, and Paul, writing the inspired words of God, confirmed that those answers are

the correct answers. God's name was being blasphemed by the Gentiles because of the Jews.

Can we reach the same conclusion just by looking at Isaiah 52? That is apparently what the translators of the Septuagint did — can we do the same thing to reach the same conclusion? Yes, I think we can — but we will need to clear at least one hurdle along the way.

And what is that hurdle? I will let Richard Hays answer that question. And who is he? He wrote a book entitled *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, and here is what he had to say about Paul's use of Isaiah 52:5 here in Romans 2:24.

Paul produces a prophecy to prove that Israel's disobedience has been foreseen and deplored in advance: "For 'on account of you the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles,' just as it is written." This is not only a low blow but also, from the standpoint of critical exegesis, a stunning misreading of the text. In Isaiah, the quoted passage is part of God's reassurance of Israel in exile ... Paul transforms Isaiah's oracle of promise into a word of reproach.

Is that correct? Was Paul guilty of a stunning misreading of the text? Of course not. We know that Hays is dead wrong — and we can show that at least two different ways.

First, we know that Paul did not misread Isaiah 52 for the simple reason that verse 24 is not the only place in Romans where Paul cites Isaiah 52. He cites the same chapter of Isaiah again later in Romans 10.

Romans 10:15 — And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

That quotation in Romans 10:15 is from Isaiah 52:7 — just two verses after the quote here in Romans 2:24 from Isaiah 52:5. And can there be any doubt in Romans 10 about whether Paul understands that Isaiah 52 was intended as reassurance to Israel? “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” And if Paul understood that in Romans 10, can there be any doubt that Paul understood the same thing in Romans 2? We know that he did.

So, where are we? We have shown that Hays’ criticism of Paul is disproved by Paul himself. Hays just needed to keep reading all the way to Romans 10! But we can also disprove Hays by looking at what is really going on in Isaiah 52. Yes, it was intended to reassure Israel, but that reassurance of Israel included a severe rebuke for Israel.

Yes, God was planning to vindicate his own name by restoring Israel — but why did God need to vindicate his own name? That is the question we must ask here in Romans 2. And the answer to that question explains why Paul uses Isaiah 52:5 the way he does here in Romans 2:24.

In short, God needed to vindicate his own name because his own name had been dragged through the mud by his own people. His people had sinned, God had punished them for that sin, and the surrounding nations had seen that punishment by God as evidence that God was powerless to save his people. Ezekiel 36 completely confirms that understanding of Isaiah 52.

Ezekiel 36:19-21 — I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, **‘These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.’** But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

And so what can we say about Hays’ complaint that Paul was misreading Isaiah 52? We can say that Hays is completely wrong — and we have now proved that in two different ways. The only person guilty of misreading anything here is Hays.

And we have also proved something else — we have proved that the Septuagint’s additions to Isaiah 52:5 were correct. But we already knew that because the inspired word of God included those same additions here in Romans 2:24, and so now we know for two different reasons.

And perhaps we should pause for a moment and consider a lesson for us in this verse. Are we concerned about God’s reputation? Are we concerned when his name is blasphemed? And, more to the point, are we ever to blame for that? Do people ever look at us and conclude something false about God?

- If I am no different from anyone else after becoming a Christian, does the world conclude that I am flawed or that Christianity is flawed?

- If I act as if I can do nothing to turn the tide of worldliness, does the world conclude that I am powerless or that the gospel is powerless?
- If I profess the name of Christ but do not follow Christ, does my hypocrisy cause the world to blaspheme my name or to blaspheme the name of God?
- If I face suffering and loss with the same despair as everyone else, does the world conclude that I am weak or that the resurrection is a lie?
- If I am consumed by the same anxieties, the same ambitions, and the same addictions as everyone else, does the world conclude that I have not tried hard enough or that Jesus has not done enough?

Whether we like it or not, people are looking at us and drawing conclusions about God. That is true today, and that was true in the days of Ezekiel and in the days of Isaiah. And the question is whether that concerns us. It certainly concerned Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Paul. And we can add to that list another great prophet — Daniel.

What we see in his great prayer in Daniel 9 is that, to Daniel, the worst part of the captivity was that someone might look at it and conclude that God was not able to deliver his people. Daniel did not pray, “Get me out of this!” Instead Daniel’s primary concern was for God and for God’s reputation. Is that also true about me? Am I a reflection of Christ, or am I a reflection on Christ?

Now that we have reached the end of verse 24, we are halfway through Paul's final argument in chapter two. Paul's point here is to convince the Jews that, absent obedience, they can rely on neither the law of Moses nor circumcision. Paul has now shown that about the law — "you who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law." Starting with the next verse, Paul will show the same thing about circumcision.

But before we look at verses 25-29, let's first list 15 big questions that we will face as we study these final five verses in chapter 2.

And where did these questions come from? They are the questions that I had after reading these five verses. And, of course, that is how Bible study works — you read the text, you have questions, and you try to answer those questions. And, yes, reading the Bible is the necessary first step in that process — but reading is just the first step. Whether reading turns into study depends entirely on what we do when we have questions.

We can find an example of the difference between reading and studying if we look at Acts 8. What was the Ethiopian eunuch doing in verse 28? He was reading the Bible. Did he understand what he was reading? He did not (verses 30-31). Did he have a question about what he was reading? He did (verse 34). So what did he do? He sought and found an answer to that question (verse 35).

That is the difference between reading the Bible and studying the Bible. And I think we all know that from our own experience — how many classes did you ever take where all you had to do was just read the textbook? Reading the textbook was certainly the first step — but was it ever the only step? Reading is vitally important, but if reading

is all we do, then we may end up where the Ethiopian eunuch would have been had he never had his questions answered.

So, with that background, what questions do we have about these final verses of Romans 2? Here is my list:

1. Who is Paul talking to in these verses?
2. What was the purpose of circumcision?
3. How did most first century Jews view circumcision?
4. Paul says in verse 25 that circumcision can have “value” if you obey the law — what is that value?
5. What does it mean in verse 25 to obey the law?
6. What does Paul mean in verse 25 when he says “your circumcision becomes uncircumcision”?
7. Who is the physically uncircumcised man in verses 26 and 27?
8. What is the law that is kept by that uncircumcised man in verses 26 and 27, and how is that law kept?
9. What does Paul mean in verse 26 when he says that man’s uncircumcision will be regarded as circumcision?
10. In verse 27, how does that uncircumcised man condemn those Jews who break the law?
11. How does Paul define a Jew in verses 28-29?
12. What does Paul mean in verse 29 when he says “by the Spirit”?

13. What does Paul mean in verse 29 when he says “not by the letter”?
14. Does Paul’s definition of “Jew” include the uncircumcised man in verse 26 who keeps the law?
15. Is Paul saying here that it is Christians (both Jew and Gentile) who are the true Jews?

Before we look at verse 25, let’s consider the first three questions from that list, which apply to the entirety of this final section.

Question #1 — Who is Paul talking to in these verses?

On one level, this question should be pretty easy given that Paul is halfway through an argument directed at the Jews who were relying on the Law and on circumcision. If the first half of the argument was directed to the Jews, then that must also be true of the second half, right?

Yes, that seems right — and it probably is right — but there are some things Paul is about to say that might give us some second thoughts. For starters, two of these final five verses will discuss an uncircumcised man. And then the final two verses will arguably redefine what it means to be a Jew. Will that redefinition in verses 28-29 be broad enough to include that uncircumcised man from verses 26-27?

Those are good questions — so good, in fact, that they are on our list. And so, as to question #1, I think at this point we should say that this argument is most likely still directed to the Jews, but let’s not make a final decision on that question until we get to the end of the argument.

Question #2 — What was the purpose of circumcision?

God answered that question when he commanded Abraham to be circumcised.

Genesis 17:11 — You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and **it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.**

That was the purpose of circumcision — it was to be a sign of the covenant — but which covenant? Not the Mosaic covenant because that covenant would not arrive until 430 years later (Galatians 3:17). The covenant under discussion in Genesis 17 was God’s covenant with Abraham.

Genesis 17:4-8 — “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

But Abraham had two sons — Isaac and Ishmael. How did the covenant apply to them? God answers that question later in Genesis 17.

Genesis 17:21 — But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.

And Isaac had two sons — Jacob and Esau. How did the covenant apply to them? Paul will consider that question later in Romans 9.

For now what we need to know is that (1) God made a covenant with Abraham, (2) that covenant with Abraham had a covenant line that went through Isaac and Jacob (even though Ishmael and Esau were circumcised), and (3) circumcision was given as a sign of that covenant.

A crucial point to note about circumcision is that it was not the point where someone entered into that covenant relationship with God. Descendants of Abraham and Jacob were not brought under that covenant by circumcision. Instead, they were **physically born** under that covenant, and then later they were circumcised as a sign of that covenant into which they had previously been born. We see that with the promise of covenant to Abraham and his offspring, but we also see that very clearly later in that same chapter.

Genesis 17:14 — Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; **he has broken my covenant.**”

A refusal to be circumcised did not mean you had not entered into the covenant, but rather meant that you had broken the covenant. Clearly, you could not break a covenant if you were not already under that covenant. Jewish men, as offspring of Abraham through Jacob, were born under that covenant with Abraham, and they would remain under that covenant if they were circumcised.

And did circumcision confer great advantages? Yes, it did. Paul will tell us about that in the next chapter, but we can already see it from God's promises to Abraham's offspring in Genesis 17. As McGuiggan says, "the Jew was physically marked out as God's 'blue-eye boy' by circumcision." And so, yes, circumcision came with advantages.