



Sunday August 24, 2014

# ZWTF

Zapping-you Whenever Thoughts Flow

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## ROMANS Part 31

Chapter 3:28-31

### Romans 3:28-31

**For we are reckoning a human to be justified by faith apart from works of law. Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not of the nations also? Yes, of the nations also, if so be that God is One, Who will be justifying the Circumcision out of faith, and the Uncircumcision through faith. Are we, then, nullifying law through faith? May it not be coming to that. Nay, we are sustaining law.**

Unless one is contrasting the two, it is contrary to speak of law and faith at the same dinner party. The law of Moses was not of faith. God said to Israel, “If you do this, then I will do that. And if you don’t do this, then I won’t do that.” An Israelite didn’t really need to believe that God would do anything differently for him or her besides what He said He would do, based on human behavior. Thus, the law was clearly an “if/then” proposition. “If you jump into the Sea of Galilee, then you will get wet.” Why jump into the Sea of Galilee and have faith that you will remain dry?

Because they make sense to us, humans like cause and effect arrangements. Well-ordered worlds please our basest instincts—they require no faith. It’s healthy for us that when we put two bricks together with mortar in-between—and keep doing this over and over—we produce a wall. It’s fun to plant a banana tree and watch a banana tree spring up. How discouraging if planting a banana tree produced a wall every now and then; or if laying bricks produced the occasional banana tree. It would darken our mood and give us facial tics. It would discourage both banana-tree planting and wall-building. We like it that two

plus two equals four. If two plus two sometimes equaled six, many of us would take to our beds and stay there. Any enterprise based on numeric calculation would regularly misfire. Planes heading for Los Angeles from Oklahoma City would on occasion land in Honolulu. In such a world, *everything* would require faith.



Justification by faith is just such a world. It crashes against what we presume to be right, taking us places we least expect to occupy. “The soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:20). This makes sense to us. But when the soul that sins stands before God in beams of glorious light, so that Christ Himself smiles and applauds the proceedings, every instinct tells us that something has misfired. We expect our “planes” to land in Death, but instead here we are in Honolulu with God Himself placing the lei around our necks, and Jesus handing us tropical refreshment.



## THE GOD OF EVERYONE

It is so common for us moderns to think of God as the God of everyone that we forget there was a day when one nation monopolized His favor. For many centuries, God was God of the Jews only. He let the rest of the nations go their own ways (Acts 14:16). Through the voice and writing of the apostle Paul, God announced a new program upon planet earth. He was now calling out another people from among the nations for a special task that He never gave Israel. This very notion would make an Israelite light a cigarette and pace the room. Israelites—even those who did not smoke—hated the idea of other people honing in on their blessings and enjoying private conversations with their God. In their minds, they owned the franchise on the Creator of the Universe. If the other nations wanted a piece of Him, they had to employ Israel as the channel. Israel's fees for this privilege were exorbitant: the nations had to give Israel its due as a necessary priesthood. When a few scraps from Israel's table did come to the "dogs" below, the nations had to remain subservient and demonstrate extreme gratitude to their benefactors; kneeling would be great, money even better. Yet now, through Paul, God spoke directly to these "dogs" of even greater blessings than those prom-

ised to the literal descendants of Abraham. Worse, the blessings came free of charge. How could this be? Was God schizophrenic?

"BEING BIPOLAR IS GREAT—I HATE IT."

Many people think that God is mentally disordered. They look at the God of the Old Testament, and the God of the New, and they think that they're dealing with either two gods, or a single God with a dual personality. This Being oscillates like an electric fan. First He blows on Israel, giving them the law and acting all mean about it. Next thing you know, He pivots on His swivel and blows on the nations, giving them grace and acting all friendly, as though these pagan Greek idol-worshippers are so much His best friends that He doesn't even make them do anything, not even sacrifice a turtle dove or gnash their teeth a little.

This crazy God can't make up His mind. Is He blown about by every wind of His own teaching?

"No!" says Paul. "God is One." This is good to know. More than that, it is critical teaching. God had to tell us this for our peace of mind. This is necessary information for us to trust Him. Two capital-G Gods—or one God with two capital-G personalities—would agitate nor-

mal people, especially when these Gods would start doing opposite things. Which God would we believe? One capital-G God says we're righteous only when we obey His laws. The other capital-G God says we're justified by faith, *apart* from works of law. One God loves Israel and ignores the nations; the other God lavishes non-Israelites with unheard-of gifts and puts Israel on the back-burner. The simple answer to this potential dilemma is that God is One. Even simpler is the truth that God does different things at different times for different reasons.

John 1:17, "For the law through Moses was given; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." This is so simple that it can barely even be called a concept. On Monday, the postman delivers your electric bill. On Tuesday, he delivers your winning million-dollar sweepstakes check. On Wednesday, here comes your sweater from Amazon. It's the same postman, bringing different things at different times. He may wear different socks now and then, but does he ever stop being your postman? Does his name ever stop being Fred? Would you ever accuse him of schizophrenia?

Likewise, God. God meant law to instruct us as to the sinfulness of sin and the inability of flesh to please Him. For this, He sent Moses. When *that* lesson was finished, it was time to teach a new lesson meant to reveal deeper recesses of His heart. This new lesson has to do with a grace that could not be fully appreciated unless contrasted with law. Moses brought the law; grace and truth come through Jesus Christ.

God employs different messengers for different lessons, but He never stops being God. He never stops being One. His character never changes.

He never wears socks.

#### OUT OF FAITH, THROUGH FAITH

**"If so be that God is One, Who will be justifying the Circumcision out of faith, and the Uncircumcision through faith" (Romans 3:30).**

I may never understand this passage of Scripture. The first thing I may ask Paul when I see him is, "What the hell were you talking about in Romans 3:30?" My friend

**"Even simpler is the truth that God does different things at different times for different reasons."**

Chris from Rio and I discussed this phrase last weekend, hypothesizing left and right. Chris produced three versions of Scripture, including one in Portuguese; but not even the Portuguese translators could shed light. A.E. Knoch's commentary is, to me, even more puzzling than the verse itself:

The Circumcision who have believed before and have received a pardon, receive this greater boon because of the faith they have. The Uncircumcision use faith as the channel in receiving it.

What is the difference between "because of the faith they have" and "use faith as a channel"? Don't people who have faith use it as a channel? Concerning the Circumcision, what does "because of the faith they have" have to do with "*out of* faith"? These are disparate concepts. Don't the Circumcision and the Uncircumcision both come to justification through faith? Then why use one phrase—"out of"—for the Circumcision, and then a different concept—"through"—for the Uncircumcision? One thing is clear (I think): Paul is playing up some difference between these two peoples who both receive justification by (through) faith.



Here is what I think: The body of Christ consists of two distinct national groups who become one in Christ: Jews and Gentiles. The Jews who believed in the Circumcision evangel before hearing Paul's message do have a certain sort of "faith." I put "faith" in quotation marks because, as I said earlier, the law requires no faith. The "faith" of the Circumcision, therefore, was faith only in the sense of being faith in a system having nothing to do with faith, *i.e.* figurative faith. When God caused some of these Jews to respond to Paul's message of justification and grace, they had to jump out of their "faith" into real faith. Romans 3:30 makes sense to me only if we put the first "faith" in quotation marks. The Jews had to exit a works-based system to embrace Paul's faith-based ways. By contrast, the Un-



circumcision know real faith from the beginning; they come out of nothing to do with even a figurative faith in God.

I've been pondering this verse for 25 years, and that's the best I've got for the time being. If you've got a better handle on this verse, then by all means let me know. Write me, and I'll pretend that I'm the one who came up with it.

### TO LAW OR NOT TO LAW

**“Are we, then, nullifying law through faith? May it not be coming to that. Nay, we are sustaining law” (Romans 3:31).**

Paul's use of the word “then” in this verse makes me think that the previous sentence could produce the mistaken notion that law was being nullified. This supports my hypothesis that the Jews were coming out of their “faith” in Moses into the real faith of the invisible blessings of Christ. So law is thrown out on its stoney little ear, right? No. Instead: “May it not be coming to that. Nay, we are sustaining law.”

Paul's word choice here has upset me for 25 years. After struggling to present believers free of law, he seems to be cancelling everything by insisting on law's continued application.

Here is how, I, Martin Zender, the World's Most Outspoken Bible Scholar, would have written this passage:

Are we, then, nullifying law through faith? Hell yes! Haven't you understood *anything* I've been saying?

Don't you wish I had written Romans? Me too. My explicit sentences would not have required commentaries—thank you very much. My book of Romans would have been banned in at least thirty-five countries, and in every single religion. I would be far too plain. My sentences would crack peoples' skulls open while smiling at them. The only reason religions keep Paul's letters hanging around in their Bibles is because they don't understand them. The only reason the Bible is the world's best-selling

book is because no one understands it.

Since I was not asked by God to write the letter that is by some miracle famously obscure, we must deal with Paul's literary arrangement. Since Paul's words are inspired by the holy spirit—whereas mine would have been inspired by too much caffeine—let us figure them out.

Paul can't mean that believers are back under law; the



very concept is impossible for those who—in the case of the nations—were never under law in the first place. Paul wrote six sentences earlier, “For we are reckoning a human to be justified apart from works of law (Romans 3:28). He's not going to say that in verse 28, and then say in verse 31, “Ha, ha! Just kidding! Law is alive and well for you. It's not nullified; it must be sustained in your life.” With the words, “We are sustaining law,” Paul has to mean some-

thing besides that the law is practically applicable in your life. A.E. Knoch makes no comments—in his commentary—on this verse. So again, here are my thoughts:

If law is neither sustained nor nullified in the lives of Greeks (or in the lives of Jews for that matter), then in what sense *is* it sustained and not nullified? The answer: *in its purpose*.

The purpose of law is to produce indignation (Romans 4:15), to cause offenses to increase (Romans 5:20), and to eventually dis-pense death (2 Corinthians 3:7). Whether a person is a Jew or a Greek, the law never stops acting this way in this eon. Law is sustained, then, in the sense of continually back-dropping and highlighting the startling nature of

**“The only reason the Bible is the world's best-selling book is because no one understands it.”**

faith. Without law or the knowledge of it, we could never appreciate a faith-based evangel. Our belief does not make law go away. This is what Paul is saying, I think. Law keeps doing what it does, even when people are no longer (or never) commanded to do it. This is so that those who grasp faith will never return to law or be drawn to it in the first place.

When Jesus said that He did not come to abolish law but to fulfill it, did He mean that the nations would then have to do law? No. Did He mean that the Jews, in this eon, would be required to observe it before His return? No. The misleading words injected by errant theologies into law passages are, “*in your life.*” In this particular passage (Matthew 5:17), Jesus referred to what *He* was doing with the law, not to what anyone else was either doing or not doing with it “in their lives.” In Romans 3:31, Paul refers to the purpose and nature of law, not to any demand he’s making of anyone to import it into their personal moral codes.

Unless used as a backdrop to highlight God’s present attitude toward humanity, let us forever keep law from insinuating itself into our lives. Today, it can only kill, condemn, and obscure the nature of grace.

This has been a presentation of Martin Zender; place *that* into the top drawer of every hotel room and smoke it. —MZ

