

## Nobody is Righteous – Part 2 (A String of Pearls)

Before we start, I need to correct something I said last time. All of the quotes in Romans 3 are not from Psalms. All but one are. What I had written down as Psalm 59 is really Isaiah 59. I'll explain that as we progress through our lesson.

This section of Romans has been one of the most challenging passages I have tackled. Only one commentator that I encountered actually delved into the background of the quotes. Paul obviously has a logic in his quotes. I have attempted to explain his rationale. Like so many passages in the Bible, I can only scratch the surface of what is there. Many read this at face value. That is OK. There is much to gain from a reading in the English. For those that want to delve deeper and gain an intimate understanding of God's message, there is plenty of material to study.

For those that have an insatiable curiosity, there is a need to ask questions like "Why did Paul pick these passages to quote?" Do the contexts of those passages play into Paul's logic?

Romans 3:10-18 contains six quotes from the Old Testament that have been likened to a "string of pearls." Many commentators and pastors just read the quotes as proof texts of Paul's argument and move on. "Nothing to see here." But a casual reading of the text engenders several questions. Why did Paul use these verses from the Old Testament. Is there a logic to them or are they all saying the same thing?

There is an article published some time ago (1977), available on Archive.org (<https://archive.org/details/godschristhispeo0000unse>, you need a logon to access the articles.) which sheds some light on these and

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other questions. This article motivated me to look into the content and context of the various quoted passages.

A word about “Archive.org” from its web page:

“The Internet Archive, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, is building a digital library of Internet sites and other cultural artifacts in digital form. Like a paper library, we provide free access to researchers, historians, scholars, people with print disabilities, and the general public. Our mission is to provide Universal Access to All Knowledge.”

“We began in 1996 by archiving the Internet itself, a medium that was just beginning to grow in use. Like newspapers, the content published on the web was ephemeral - but unlike newspapers, no one was saving it. Today we have 28+ years of web history accessible through the Wayback Machine and we work with 1,200+ library and other partners through our Archive-It program to identify important web pages.”

I have found myself going there more often of late.

The article I refer to was written by Leander E. Keck who was Dean of the Yale Divinity School (1979-1989) and Winkley Professor of Biblical Theology. The article is “The Function of Rom 3:10-18” in the book “God’s Christ and His People, Studies in Honour of Nils Alstrup Dahl,” pages 141-156. (<https://archive.org/details/godschristhispeo0000unse>, you need a logon to access the articles.)

If we are going to analyze Paul’s quotations from the Old Testament, there are some assumptions/rules we need to consider.

1. Romans, as part of Scripture, is inerrant. There are accusations that Paul has changed the wording of the Old Testament quotes to fit his agenda. The original texts in Psalms and Isaiah are inerrant Scripture. So is Romans. Paul understood the meaning of the verses

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he quotes. As such he has applied translations of words that explain an aspect of the quote that might be otherwise missed. In at least one case, there is what could be considered a rhetorical observation. Paul brings out the unsaid part, the implied answer, of that verse.

2. Romans is a highly crafted book. It is looked upon, not just by believers, but also unbelievers as a masterful piece of literature. In other words, many consider the book to be highly and skillfully crafted.
3. Paul studied under an expert on the Mosaic Law and the Old Testament Scriptures, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Paul was smart and well educated and an expert on the Old Testament Scriptures. Rather than belittle his text because we are ignorant of many things related to that time in history, we should listen to Paul, attempting to better understand how he is making his argument in Romans.
4. A quote from the Old Testament should be considered in the context from which it was taken as well as the context it is used in the New Testament.
5. Romans is highly theological. Paul is making many points concerning the gospel and in particular, God's righteousness.
6. As mentioned two weeks ago, Paul, here in Romans chapter 3, is quoting from the book of Psalms, from Psalms written by David. There is also one quote from the book of Isaiah.

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Previously, Paul’s quotes were identified as coming from five different Psalms written by David and one passage from Isaiah.

<b>Romans</b>	<b>Psalms</b>	<b>Psalm Book/Author</b>
3:10-12	14:1-3/ (53:1-3)	Book I: David/ Book II: David
3:13a	5:9	Book I: David
3:13b	140:3	Book V: David
3:14	10:7	Book I: Likely David
3:15	Isaiah 59:7ff	Isaiah
3:18	36:1	Book I: David

Sources for Paul’s Quotes in Romans 3:10-18

Technically, these quotes, when strung together are called a “catena.” Let us just stick with “string of pearls” for now. For us, that is what they are: Gems from the Old Testament brought forward into the New Testament as explanation that all mankind is worthy of judgment from the righteousness of God.

Herman has used a “catena” or string of pearls in his lessons. So have I. Here is one from Herman<sup>1</sup> (the underlined text is what is actually quoted):

**2 Corinthians 5:7 for we walk by faith, not by sight**

**Romans 14:23 23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://springvalleybiblechurch.org/Audio/Foundation/notes/Basicsfaith.pdf>

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**1 John 5:4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.**

Why did Paul pick these Psalms (and the one passage from Isaiah) instead of other ones for his string of pearls? Keep in mind the context:

**Romans 3:9 9 What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;**

**All are under sin.** That is what he is documenting from the Old Testament. He had to find some passages in the Old Testament that show the universality of sin. Often sin in the singular relates to the sin principle or the sin nature as opposed to specific sins.

These Psalms have some elements in common. The psalms of David point to his adversaries. Assuming David was under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he represents the divine viewpoint. His attackers and accusers are described, often using terms like “wicked” or “evil.” They are unbelievers and believers who have become hostile toward God. Paul is holding them up as universals. This is how people who are hostile to God are. We as unbelievers were that way.

**Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.**

Very similar to the John 3:16 passage.

1. These passages from the Old Testament narrate relationships to God: Those like David who seek God and those who abandon God and say there is no God and have no fear of God.

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2. These passages are laden with three words for unrighteousness: evil, wickedness and iniquity. There are several other words that could be included in this list.
3. There are key words indicating relationship or lack of relationship to God.

Psalm 14:1 The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.”

Psalm 5:2 Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God, For to You I pray.

Psalm 140:6 I said to the Lord, “You are my God; Give ear, O Lord, to the voice of my supplications.

Psalm 10:4 The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him. All his thoughts are, “There is no God.”

Isaiah 59:2 But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.

Psalm 36:1 Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; There is no fear of God before his eyes.

Douglas Moo has authoritatively identified Paul’s purpose in Romans 3:9 which is the reason the string of pearls is brought in. So let us listen to Dr. Moo.

“But, as Paul has repeatedly emphasized in chap. 2, the Jews have no advantage at all when it comes to God's impartial judgment of every person “according to his or her works.” And this is the issue that Paul is addressing in v. 9, as his explanation of his negative response indicates: "we have already accused all people, whether Jews or Greeks, of being under sin.” Paul is referring to the comprehensive indictment of

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humanity in 1:18-2:29, as first the Greek or the Gentile (1:19b-32) and then the Jew (2:1-29) were brought before the divine bar and found wanting. We have, then, in this statement, Paul's own comment on his purpose in this section of his letter. All people who have not experienced the righteousness of God by faith are "under sin": that is, they are helpless captives to its power. However arrived at, Paul's understanding that all people, Jews as well as Gentiles, were not just sinners but helpless pawns under sin's power, distinguished him sharply from his Jewish contemporaries. Nothing that Paul has said suggests that there are exceptions to this rule, and nothing shows more clearly the desperate need for the message of the gospel. For the problem with people is not just that they commit sins; their problem is that they are enslaved to sin. What is needed, therefore, is a new power to break in and set people free from sin — a power found in, *and only in*, the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

There appears to be an emphasis on relationship to God (David) or lack of relationship to God (others). Look at the following quotes from these Psalms, and Isaiah.

**Psalm 14:1 The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good.**

**Psalm 5:2 Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God, For to You I pray.**

**Psalm 140:6 I said to the Lord, “You are my God; Give ear, O Lord, to the voice of my supplications.**

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<sup>2</sup> Moo, D.J. (1996). *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. Page 201

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**Psalm 10: The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him. All his thoughts are, “There is no God.”**

“There is no God” can refer to unbelieving Greeks as well as unbelieving Jews.

Now in Isaiah, the tone changes from “they” to “you” the Jews. So Paul is making good on his identification of all are under sin, both the Greek/Gentile and the Jew.

**Isaiah 59:2 But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.**

**Psalm 36:1 Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; There is no fear of God before his eyes.**

Perhaps these quotes from the Psalms that Paul used, gives a hint why he picked them. They talk about a relationship with God (David) and a lack of relationship with God (Greeks/Gentiles and Jews). Then he picked out specific characterizations of people to show how they are dominated by “sin.”

Lets look briefly at the individual Psalms and the passage from Isaiah.

Psalms, which is Hebrew poetry, is by nature very structured. By quoting from Psalms, Paul brings in some of that structure.

Paul progresses from “none is” in the quotes from Psalm 14 to active sins with emphasis on “wickedness” and “evil” to active sins expressed through the use of various parts of the body, including sins of the tongue.



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He has also gone from individual kinds of adversaries to a passage in Isaiah accusing the people of the nation Israel under King Manasseh.

Did Paul just pick out six passages that support his thesis or did he have a progression of items, a kind of story to tell in the background? Let us look at the individual Psalms and quotation from Isaiah individually while trying to fit them into Paul’s narrative.

**Psalm 14** starts the string of pearls. The Ryrie Study Bible says, “David laments the moral foolishness and corruption of the whole human race (vv. 1-6) and longs for the establishment of the righteous kingdom of the Lord on earth (v. 7).” Later it says, “Paul cites these verses in Rom. 3:10-12 in support of the universal and perennial sinfulness of mankind.”

It is from this Psalm that Paul picks up the repetitive “There is none” punctuated by “all.” All through Romans, Paul has turned up the contrast such that all start out as sinners who are at heart “wicked” and “evil.” Paul points to the Psalms and Isaiah as a source of this thinking. Paul didn’t start using “all.” The Old Testament Scriptures started using this contrast. Paul points to it as a proof text for his argument. Here again is the structure Paul inherits from Psalm 14:

Romans 3:10 ...“ <u>There is none</u> righteous, <u>not even one</u> ;	Psalm 14:1 ... <u>There is no one</u> who does good. (?or 14:3?)
Romans 3:11 <u>There is none</u> who understands, <u>There is none</u> who seeks for God;	Psalm 14:2 The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men To see <u>if there are any</u> who understand, <u>Who seek after God</u> .
Romans 3:12 All have turned aside, together they have become useless; <u>There is none</u> who does good, <u>There is not even one</u> .”	Psalm 14:3 They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; <u>There is no one</u> who does good, not even one.

If Paul sees Psalm 14:2 as a rhetorical question, then his “quote” is the embedded expected answer: There is none. It is universal. None!

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I see more and more questions asked in the Old Testament which are not explicitly answered there. Then I see the answer being provided by a writer of the New Testament. The book of Job is full of those type questions. Herman excerpted the “Ten Questions of Job.” The book of Romans answers these questions which concern the uncleanness and unrighteousness of man and how a “cleansed” man can stand before God. In the book of Romans Paul has supplied the answer to God’s search for men who seek after Him.

The Psalm 14 quotations point to the universal bankruptcy of mankind. This provides an umbrella for the rest of the quotes.

These are not just random quotes from the Psalms. They are crafted into a powerful narrative. It has a visible structure.

Let’s look again at Romans 3:10-12 which quotes excerpts from Psalm 14.

- 10b There is none righteous, not even one;
- 11 There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God;
- 12 All have turned aside, together they have become useless;  
There is none who does good,  
There is not even one.”

The first part of the quotes, this from Psalm 14:1-3 repeats, literally, “None is...” This expresses the character of the unbeliever. This forms what is called a chiasm. The first and last statements express a similar thought. It emphasizes the middle statement, “all have turned aside...”. Also note that “none” is the opposite of “all.” The emphasis is then on “All have turned aside. Together they have become useless.”

Douglas Moo provides some insight into these verses in Romans. “What he (Paul) means is that there is not a single person who, apart from God’s justifying grace, can stand as “right” before God. This meaning is not far

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from David’s intention in the Psalm (i.e. Psalm 14), as he unfolds the myriad dimensions of human folly.<sup>3</sup>”

Also remember the ten questions of Job that indicate the same. Before you ask the question, Paul did not quote from Job specifically. But his focus on righteousness must have come from the questions of Job.

E. W. Hengstenberg, a very insightful professor from the 1800’s put it this way:

“He justly puts this passage, vers. 1-3, at the head of his proof; for the Old Testament contains no passage in which the universality and depth of human corruption are painted in such vivid colours.<sup>4</sup>”

**Psalm 5.** What does Psalm 5 contain that is of interest?

In general terms, it contains a contrast David makes between the righteous and the wicked and evil. As God’s representative in the Psalm, David seeks God’s righteousness which is contrasted against the evil and wickedness of those who oppose God.

He starts by asking for help. He mentions “evil” and “wickedness” in verse 4. This starts a litany of “evil” and “wicked” in the Psalms that Paul quotes from. Those traits characterize those who abandon God and do what is right in their own eyes. Sodom and Gomorrah are examples of that. The tribe of Benjamin in the book of Judges is another example.

**Judges 2:11 Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals,**

**Judges 2:12 and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them**

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3 Moo, D.J. (1996). *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. Page 203

4 Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1863). *Commentary on the Psalms*. Volume 1 page 205

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**out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the Lord to anger.**

When we get to the Isaiah quote, we find that Israel under King Manasseh was another example. The “evil” people are “you” the people of Israel. They abandoned their God, the one and only God.

We all opposed God as unbelievers. It is appropriate for Paul to include a characterization of opposition to God in Romans chapter 3. It is presented in general, universal terms.

Paul continues his narrative by starting to use parts of the body to illustrate the misuse of them by the “none” who fail to do good/righteousness. Here he employs the throat (from Psalm 5) and the lips (from Psalm 140).

Romans 3:13 “Their <u>throat</u> is an open grave, With their tongues they keep deceiving,” “The poison of asps is under their <u>lips</u> ”;	Psalm 5:9 ...Their <u>throat</u> is an open grave;... Psalm 140:3 They sharpen their tongues as a serpent; Poison of a viper is under their <u>lips</u> .
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The second half of the Romans 3:13 is from Psalm 140. This Psalm starts out as a plea from David to rescue him from “evil men.” Whereas Psalm 14 starts by referring to the corruption of the “foolish” here David constantly references “evil” and “wicked” men, especially those who are characterized by sins of the tongue.

There is perhaps a thought that might be brought in here from John:

**John 8:44 You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does**

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**not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *nature*, for he is a liar and the father of lies.**

And if that, then why bring up “serpent?” The Hebrew of in Psalm 140 for serpent is the same word used in Genesis 3, the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

**Psalm 10.** This Psalm concentrates on descriptions of the “wicked.” There are nine verses that narrate actions the wicked engage in. A body part, “mouth” is used in this verse. Also the comment in Psalm 10:4 “All his thoughts are, “There is no God.”

Romans 3:4 “Whose <u>mouth</u> is full of cursing and bitterness”;	Psalm 10:7 His <u>mouth</u> is full of curses and deceit and oppression; Under his tongue is mischief and wickedness.
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**Isaiah 59.** While the individual Psalms of David speak of hostility toward David and the nation of Israel, Isaiah chapter 59 is talking about a danger that was future to Isaiah caused by contemporary evil behavior. Yet, the result of the separation of the people of Israel from their God caused the exile which started in 587 B.C. Those Jews in Rome were perhaps the continuing result of that exile. They are not in Israel but in Rome.

Verses 2-3 are addressed to “you,” the people of Israel. Then in verse 4, the addressee goes to the third person, “no one.”

Another body part, the feet, shows up in verse 7. As far as Paul is concerned, he has gone from “head to foot.”

Romans 3:15 “Their <u>feet</u> are swift to shed blood,	Isaiah 59:7 Their <u>feet</u> run to evil, And they hasten to shed innocent blood; Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, Devastation and
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	destruction are in their highways.
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Psalm 36. Thomas Constable quotes from Mitchell Dahood: ““This is a psalm of powerful contrasts, a glimpse of human wickedness at its most malevolent, and divine goodness in its many-sided fullness. Meanwhile the singer is menaced by the one and assured of victory by the other. Few psalms cover so great a range in so short a space.<sup>5</sup>””

Romans 3:18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”	Psalm 36:1 ...There is no fear of God before his eyes....
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**Psalm 36:10 O continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You, And Your righteousness to the upright in heart.**

**Psalm 36:11 Let not the foot of pride come upon me, And let not the hand of the wicked drive me away.**

**Psalm 36:12 There the doers of iniquity have fallen; They have been thrust down and cannot rise.**

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Constable's Notes on Psalms (2024), page 176 Available at <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/psalms.pdf>