



First – and Last!

John Piper considers the implications of Romans 1:16

Everyone!

Paul used that wonderful word "everyone" in **Romans 1:16**; "The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to *everyone* who believes." O, what an exhilarating word to those of us in this room who feel that there is something about us that rules us out! Wrong family, wrong background, wrong education, wrong language, wrong race, wrong culture, wrong sexual preference, wrong moral track record. Then to hear the word, "*Everyone* who believes." Everyone! One thing *can* rule you out: unbelief - not trusting Jesus. But nothing else has to. The good news that Christ died for our sins, and that he rose from the dead to open eternal life, and that salvation is by grace through faith – all that is for *everyone who believes*. Not just Jews and not just Gentiles and no one race or social class or culture, but *everyone* who believes.

In What Ways Do the Jews Have Priority?

So why then does he follow this exhilarating word "everyone" with a word that seems to give priority to Jews? "The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek*." How does he mean, "To the Jew first"? What kind of priority, what kind of "firstness" do they have? And why does he say this? What effect does he want this to have on us?

To answer this let me suggest six ways that the Jews are first in experiencing the salvation of God. And then we will look at a few ways that they are not first. Finally we will see what effect this should have on us today.

How are the Jews "first"?

1. The Jews have a priority over Gentiles as the chosen people of God

How do they have priority over Gentiles? In **Genesis 12**, God chooses Abraham and his descendants freely from all the peoples of the world to bless with his covenant and promise. **Nehemiah 9:7** says, "God . . . chose Abram, and brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees." Then **Deuteronomy 14:2** says about the whole Jewish people, "The LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." And **Amos 3:2** says, "You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth." And here in **Romans 11:28-29**, Paul says, "From the standpoint of the gospel they [the Jews] are enemies for your sake [you Gentiles], but from the standpoint of [election, or] God's choice, they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."

The Jews have a priority over Greeks (that is, all Gentiles, by implication) because of their special role as God's elect or chosen people. He set his favor on them and set them apart from all the peoples. Freely! Not because of any virtue or special value in them, but simply on the basis of his free choice: "The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers" (**Deuteronomy 7:7-8**, See *The Pleasures of God*, pp. 128-133).

2. The Jews have a priority over Gentiles as the guardians of God's special revelation, the Old Testament Scriptures

In **Romans 3:1**, Paul asks our question: "What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?" And he answers in verse 2, "Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God." In other words, God gave his special revelation and promises to Israel by Moses and the prophets. **Romans 9:4** puts it like this: "[They] are Israelites to whom belong . . . the covenants and the giving of the Law . . . and the promises." All the great expressions and foreshadowings of the gospel of salvation were given to the Jews in the Word of God, the Old Testament. So the Jews had priority in having the Scriptures.

3. The Jews have a priority over the Gentiles in that the Messiah himself, Jesus Christ, came first as a Jew to the Jews

In **Romans 9:5**, Paul brings his list of privileges to a climax with these words: "From [the Jews] is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen." The Messiah, Jesus, was a Jew, a Son of David (**Romans 1:3**). And he focused his earthly ministry on the Jews. They had a priority in his work. In **Matthew 10:5-6**, Jesus said to the twelve apostles as he sent them out during his life, "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And in **Matthew 15:24**, Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." So during his earthly life, Jesus was focused on the Jews. They had priority in his ministry.

4. The Jews have a priority over the Gentiles in that salvation is from the Jews

These are the very words of Jesus in **John 4:22**. Jesus says to the Samaritan woman at the well, "You worship what you do not know; we [Jews] worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews." This simply sums up all that we have seen so far. They are the chosen nation; the nation with God's special revelation; and the nation with the Messiah, the Saviour. So, clearly, salvation is "from the Jews."

Another way to see that salvation is from the Jews is found in **Romans 11:17-24** where Paul compares the Jewish nation to an olive tree. He says that natural branches are broken off and unnatural branches were grafted in, meaning that Jews by birth were unbelieving and so cut off from the covenant of promise; and Gentiles who were believing were grafted in and saved by the covenant of promise. Verses 17-18 are crucial for us: "If some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, [then] do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you." In other words, salvation comes to us Gentiles from the root of God's covenant with the Jews. We are simply grafted in like wild olive branches that have no historical claim at all on being God's people. And God saves us by reckoning us children of Abraham by faith, as Paul says in **Galatians 3:7**, "It is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham."

So Jews have priority because "salvation is from the Jews." All salvation is salvation through God's covenant with Abraham!

5. The Jews have a priority over the Gentiles in that Paul evangelized Jews first when he brought the gospel to a new place

For example, in **Acts 13:46** Paul and Barnabas are preaching in Antioch of Pisidia, and the Jews will not listen to the gospel, so they say, "*It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.*" In other words, just as God chose Israel and revealed himself to Israel and sent the Messiah and Saviour to Israel so that salvation is from Israel, it is fitting that in the spread of the Gospel to new places, the Jews hear first of their Messiah and the good news of his salvation. So Jews have a priority in the order of frontier missions when the gospel comes to a new place.

6. The Jews have a priority over the Gentiles in final judgment and final blessing.

In **Romans 2:9-10**, Paul says, amazingly, "There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, *of the Jew first and also of the Greek*, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*" In other words, the priority that the Jews have, if it is rejected and squandered will result in a priority in judgment. And if they are grateful for their priority and trust in the mercy of their Messiah, then they will go first into the final blessing of God. There are definite dangers in having this priority. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be required" (**Luke 12:48**).

So when Paul says in **Romans 1:16**, "The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek*," we should call to mind these six ways that the Jews have a priority over the Gentiles.

They are the historic chosen people of God.

They are the guardians of God's special revelation, the Old Testament Scriptures.

The Messiah and Saviour, Jesus, comes to the world as a Jew to Jews.

Salvation is from the Jews, since everyone who is saved is saved by being connected to the covenant with Abraham by faith.

The Jews are to be evangelized first when the gospel penetrates a new region.

The Jews will enter first into final judgment and final blessing.

In What Ways Do the Jews Not Have Priority?

Before we ask why Paul says this and what effect it should have on us, let's be sure we see several ways that the Jews do not have priority. This is extremely important.

1. The Jews do not have priority in righteousness or merit

Nor do Gentiles. We are on the same footing. That is one of the main points of the first two chapters of Romans. Paul concludes in **Romans 3:9-10**, "What then? Are we [Jews] better than they [Gentiles]? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, 'THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE.'" He makes the same point in **Romans 3:22-23**, "There is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

2. The Jews do not have priority in how they are saved

They are saved exactly the way Gentiles are. This is clear from **Romans 3: 29-30**, "Is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also . . . God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith." And from **Romans 10:12**, "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; (13) for 'WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.'" So neither Jews nor Gentiles have priority in how they are saved: both are saved by faith in Christ, not in any ethnic or religious distinctives.

3. The Jews do not have priority in participation in God's covenant blessings

The mystery of the gospel that Paul preaches, he says, is that Gentiles now are full partners in the blessings of Jewish salvation. Listen to **Ephesians 2:12-13** and 18-19, "You [Gentiles] were . . . separate from Christ [the Messiah], excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ . . . (18) for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household." Again in **Ephesians 3:4-6**, "When you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, . . . that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus [the Messiah Jesus] through the gospel."

So Jews do not have priority in participation in God's covenant blessings. Gentiles are full fellow heirs of all the promises of God.

Why Did Paul Mention the Priority of the Jews?

So we come to a close with the question: Why did Paul mention this priority of the Jews in Romans 1:16? "The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek*"? What effect should it have?

Being influenced by **Romans 11:17-32**, I think the answer is that Paul wants to humble both Jew and Greek and make them deeply aware that they depend entirely on mercy, not on themselves or their tradition or ethnic connections. To the Gentiles he says, in essence, salvation is of the Jews. You are not being saved by your Greek culture – or any other culture. You are being saved by a salvation that comes through the despised Semitic people called the Jews. "You do not support the root [of the Abrahamic covenant], the root supports you." So do not boast over the branches (**Romans 11:18**). We Gentiles are saved by becoming, as it were, spiritual Jews (**Romans 2:28-29**). This should humble us and strip us of any arrogance and boasting in any presumed ethnic superiority. It also should vanquish anti-Semitism and fill us with zeal for evangelism to Jews.

Similarly, Paul says to the Jews, your salvation is not your own. It is God's and he gives it to whom he pleases. He can raise up from stones – even Gentile stones! – children to Abraham (**Matthew 3:9**). The words "also to the Greek" in **Romans 1:16** would have been as offensive to the Jews as the words "to the Jew first" were to the Gentiles. What they thought were Jewish prerogatives are, in fact, shared by the lowliest Gentiles who believe. Both of us are being humbled. We Gentiles must humble ourselves to be saved through a Jewish Messiah and a Jewish covenant. Jews must humble themselves to receive unclean Gentiles into full covenant membership and share all the blessings of the promise of Abraham.

The whole point is that God is the One who has mercy. Ethnicity is not decisive here. There is no merit with him. We are all sinners. So the real emphasis falls back on that

