

Romans 9-11

The Promise-Making,
Promise-Keeping God

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*Romans 9-11: The Promise-Making, Promise-Keeping
God*

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This volume was compiled using the notes from a series of sermons through the book of Romans that Pastor Paul delivered to his congregation at Branch of Hope OPC in Torrance, California.

This section, titled *The Promise-Making, Promise-Keeping God*, is comprised of sermons on chapters nine, ten and eleven of Romans.

At the end of each of his sermon notes, Pastor Paul has included a section of “Questions for Study and Meditation.”

We hope the reader will find these helpful in their study of and meditation on the Word of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

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Romans 9:1-3

The Sin of Indifference

December 7, 2014

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3).

Introduction

I recently engaged in a formal debate. An accurate understanding of the ninth chapter of Romans played a significant role in this discussion. Afterward, a fellow—a Christian fellow—found me in the hallway, put his finger in my chest and told me: “You better watch yourself!” I mention this in order that we might recognize we are entering into a somewhat controversial portion of Paul’s grand epistle.

As we transition into chapter 9 (really, chapters 9-11) it almost appears the Apostle Paul abruptly changes the subject. It is no hard argument to say that Romans 8 is one of the most comforting chapters in all of Holy Scripture. We are yanked now from the warmth of the Romans 8 campfire to the Romans 9 trial by fire.

Paul engages now in the topics you don’t want the camp speaker addressing. The troublemakers can engage in these topics over coffee after the rest of the campers have gone to bed. The sovereignty of God, predestination, reprobation, the place of Israel in prophecy—the dream team of controversy and division. It’s all found in Romans 9-11.

Let me state at the get-go that I don’t think Romans 9-11 is primarily a systematic discussion on the sovereignty of God, predestination or Israel in prophecy. I agree with Schreiner:

At the forefront of Paul’s thinking is God’s faithfulness to his promises.¹

¹ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 472). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Might I suggest that the thematic verse (half of a verse) for Romans 9-11 is Romans 9:6a, **“But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect.”** What we see in Romans chapters 9 through 11 is not an abrupt change in topic, but an explanation—an apologetic for the comfort found in chapter 8. Paul will demonstrate that God is a promise-making, promise-keeping God. There was confusion as to who are the objects of God’s covenant promises. *Was it Israel or the church? Had God wretched?*

Israel was promised the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27), but in Romans 8:4 this promise is fulfilled in the church. Israel had been promised a future resurrection (Ezekiel 37), but Paul tells the church that God, who raised Christ, will give life to your mortal bodies (Romans 8:10-11). Israel was God’s son (Exodus 4:22); now believers in Christ are sons and daughters (Romans 8:14-17). An inheritance was promised to Israel (Isaiah 60), but now the believer is the “joint heir” with Christ (Romans 8:17). Israel was God’s chosen people (Amos 3:2), but Paul aims this blessed designation to those who have faith in Christ (Roman 8:29-30). God had promised never to forsake Israel (Deuteronomy 31:6), but it is the church—the believer—who can have the assurance that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:39). Romans 9 through 11 is Paul’s treatise on the faithfulness of God. And all those sub-topics (sovereignty, election, prophecy) that Paul offers in this excursion become the mortar on which our comfort and God’s honor and glory are built—topics we will seek to grasp in the weeks and months to come. But for now, just verses 1 through 3.

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3).

The Sin of Indifference

In the ninth chapter of Ezekiel, we observe a very unsettling example of God’s justice. With all the sensationalism revolving around the mark of the beast (placed on hands and foreheads), we seldom see a reference to the mark recorded in this passage.

Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his waist. And the Lord said to him, “Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.” And to the others he said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary.” So they began with the elders who were before the house. Then he said to them, “Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain. Go out.” So they went out and struck in the city. And while they were striking, and I was left alone, I fell upon my face, and cried, “Ah, Lord God! Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel in the outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?” Then he said to me, “The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great. The land is full of blood, and the city full of injustice. For they say, ‘The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord does not see.’ As for me, my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; I will bring their deeds upon their heads.” And behold, the man clothed in linen, with the writing case at his waist, brought back word, saying, “I have done as you commanded me” (Ezekiel 9:3-11).

In verse 4 there is a mark put on the foreheads of those who **“sigh and groan over all the abominations”** committed in Jerusalem. Those who exhibited that compassion and sorrow for the lost will receive the mark and escape the judgment.

It would be an unwarranted conclusion to say they merited clemency from God by their ability to sigh and groan. It would be more accurate to say that their grief was the natural outpouring of eyes, ears and hearts quickened by the grace of God. For those who

have truly called upon the name of the Lord, indifference to the plight of the lost is not an option. It is so easy for Christians, and the churches they form, to fall into a niche of social comfort and exclusivity.

Years ago, I spent quite a bit of time at a little beach village called Piha, in New Zealand. It was on the Tasman Sea and the currents were dangerous; many people would drown. I became friends with the lifeguards who were almost all hard-working volunteers. It was an enjoyable and effective group of lifesavers. They loved their job and did it well. Consequently, they had deep and abiding love and fellowship with each other.

A few years later I heard a little parable comparing a life-saving station to a church:

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for those who were lost. Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area wanted to become associated with the station and gave of their time, money, and effort to support its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building.

Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work.

The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club's decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club's initiations were held. About this time a large ship wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split among the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station. So they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

The Christian has been given the great responsibility of caring about the souls of others.

But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes *any* person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's

hand.’ “So you, son of man: I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me. “When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked *man*, you shall surely die!’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked *man* shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. “Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul” (Ezekiel 33:6-9).

Indifference is a sin.

The Protestant Problem

There is also the flipside of this. Dr. Greg Bahnsen spoke of going to Russia and a discussion he had there with a Russian Orthodox Priest. The priest spoke of “The Protestant Problem.” The Protestant Problem is just the opposite of the Lifesaving Station Problem. The Protestant Problem unfolds when a person hears the gospel and joyfully responds. They attend church and are excited about worshiping God and in their young enthusiasm they invite others who invite other and so forth. So, *what’s the problem?*

There is either no, or very limited, interest in true piety, in-depth study, hard teachings—the weightier matters (they like chapter 8, but not so much chapter 9). You might say that the lifesaving station is full of unbridled and uninformed enthusiasm. There is a shipwreck and everybody jumps in the water only to find themselves overtaken by the current. Ill-equipped for the task the station itself needs to be rescued.

The Apostle Paul, though admittedly a sinful man (1 Timothy 1:15), did not fall into either of these categories. He was neither dispassionate nor ignorant. But apparently not everyone believed he had their best interests at heart. Why else would he begin this chapter by calling his own conscience before the tribunal of God?

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit (Romans 9:1).

The Christian Conflict

Here we see the common Christian conflict. By any outward observation, Paul was viewed as an enemy to his Jewish brothers. Their reaction to him was similar to their reaction to Jesus:

And Festus said, “King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer” (Acts 25:24).

This is where the lifesaving story loses analogous value. For even though the people you seek to save might, in a panic, try to drown their rescuers, it is generally not premeditated and conspiratorial.

I recall, when I first came to faith as a teenager, thinking people would be happy for me. Some were—many were not. I recall thinking people would appreciate my concern for their souls when I would tell them about Jesus. Some were—others were quite offended. As time went on, I found that seeking to live out the faith was like signing up to serve in the military during a war. And the war is a war with many fronts.

There is conflict with the world, with the family, with an apostate church (the Apostle’s conflict in our current passage), with pagan religions, unidentified (and sometime unidentifiable) philosophies, ideologies, and so many **“lofty opinion(s) raised against the knowledge of God” (2 Corinthians 10:5)**. Of course, with this comes the internal conflict with our own sin and ignorance.

And here is where it gets very tricky.

There is a great, great temptation to be offended when your effort to love and minister to others is spurned. This weakness in the human heart is, little doubt, the reason we read in Proverbs:

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy (Proverbs 27:5, 6).

Or in the Psalms:

Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it (Psalm 141:5).

It is one of those passages we love until it applies to us. The Apostle Paul found himself sharing in the sufferings of Christ. You wonder if he took comfort in the Psalm:

In return for my love they accuse me, but I give myself to prayer. So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love (Psalm 109:4, 5).

As we launch into this chapter (really, three chapters) so rich in content—so weighty in theology—let us be careful to enter into our study with an eye on the Apostles' heart toward those who sought his life, who had the opinion that he **“ought not to live any longer” (Acts 25:24)**; to them he writes:

...that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Romans 9:2-3).

Brethren and Countrymen According to the Flesh

As we shall see in the weeks to come, there is more to this than Paul's friendships—he grieves over an entire apostate religious community. But we shouldn't exclude the humanity of Paul's outburst of sorrow. These are his **“brethren”** *adelphon* **“countrymen”** *syngenon*. That he depicts them as brethren and countrymen according to the flesh may lead our thinking in a couple of directions.

He may be emphasizing that they are not brothers in the faith—a designation reserved for those who have faith (Galatians 3:7). He may be appealing to the life of tight community with his fellow Israelites and the great sorrow of seeing them in such darkness. I see no logical reason why both can't be inferred.

What kind of maturity must he have had to look past their slanders—to allow such love to be cultivated in his heart that he would grieve for them the way a loving parent might grieve over their own recalcitrant child!

Accursed from Christ

There is no stronger verbiage available for the apostle when he wishes **“that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren.”** It is, no doubt, hyperbolic language. He had just written of how nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:39). But, like Moses, he loved God and he loved others.

So Moses returned to the Lord and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written” (Exodus 32:31, 32).

There are some great and glorious teachings in the chapters upon which we will now embark. But let us ever be reminded how the apostle begins his message—not as a professor at a chalk board, but as a pastor whose grief and sorrow for the lost—even the lost who sought to inflict him—were driving influences in his heart and life. As the Psalmist wrote:

My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law (Psalm 119:136).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Give a brief synopsis of the Apostle Paul's main theme in chapters 9 through 11. Why does he engage in these theological topics?
2. How should a Christian respond to the plight of the lost?
3. What is the sin of indifference?
4. Discuss how churches can be healthy and unhealthy lifesaving stations.
5. What is the "Protestant Problem"?
6. What is the "Christian conflict"? What are the various fronts of this conflict?
7. Discuss the Apostle Paul's disposition toward his brothers and countrymen according to the flesh. Can you think of anyone you feel that way about?

Romans 9:4-5

Who Are Israelites?

December 14, 2014

(we will read from verse 1 for context)

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom *pertain* the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service *of God*, and the promises; of whom *are* the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ *came*, who is over all, *the eternally blessed God. Amen (Romans 9:1-5).*

Introduction

I'm nostalgic and pretty easily moonstruck. I remember walking through my elementary school in Hermosa Beach before they tore it down and listening to the old familiar echoes in the hallways and the smells yielding connotations of days gone by. I have, hanging in my office at home, a section of the gym bleacher from my high school that somehow found my name etched upon it. We have a member in our church who just coached a team at that high school to its first state championship—I was there forty years ago when they started that sport and I get sappy when I think of the evolution of that sport and all the coaches and players.

In the not-too-distant past I walked through a building on 3rd Street in Hermosa Beach where I attended church on my own as a seven-year-old for a year. I still have the Bible they gave me when I turned eight. I tried to remember where I sat and which Sunday school class I was in. I wonder if the little old lady who taught that class with the flannel board, who is likely now in glory, would have been encouraged to know that I've continued in the faith.

I recall walking through St. Peter's Cathedral, conflicted between the magnificence of the structure and the devastating theological/historical dramas surrounding its construction. Shortly thereafter I visited Corinth and stood on a little, humble platform,

where (I was told) the Apostle Paul preached. I find myself moved by these places and events. I am so looking forward to the premier of *Unbroken*—the story of Louis Zamperini. I drove by his old house a few months ago and imagined him playing there as a child.

Paul's Conversion

But none of these things come close to what it must have been like for the Apostle Paul. As you know, when on his way to Damascus **“breathing threats and murders against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1)**, a **“light from heaven shone around him” (Acts 9:3)** and then **“for three days he was without sight” (Acts 9:9)** after which Ananias found him and laid his hands upon him in order that he might regain his sight **“and be filled with the Holy Spirit—something like scales (falling) from his eyes” (Acts 9:17, 18)**.

How horrifying, yet exhilarating that experience must have been for Paul. So much can be said of the spiritual, psychological, emotional re-creation—regeneration of Saul to Paul—a Spirit-given awareness of the depth of his own sin, of the height and power of God's grace in Christ, the utter dispensing of his own righteousness that he may **“know the power of His resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:9, 10)**.

But along with Paul's regeneration came an unveiled grasp of the true nature of the religion he had grown up with and what it all actually meant. For Paul was not being introduced to religion—even the true religion—for the first time. He had been raised in the trappings (and truly they had become a trap of sorts) of the true religion. His religious pedigree was of the highest order: **“circumcised the eighth day...the stock (genous) of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5)**.

Paul had not been part of a community that would at least admit they had abandoned true religion. You might say they were **“holding to a form of godliness, although they had(have) denied its power” (2 Timothy 3:5)**. The power to save was found in Christ and the very religious community, structure, liturgy that was designed to show forth the person and work of the promised Messiah had gotten in its own way. They had fallen in love with the shadows

(Hebrews 8:5). You can multiply what I felt at St. Peter's by a thousand as Paul would observe his former religious cultus.

As we have previously discussed, Paul was greatly vexed in his spirit for that community—his brethren, **“countrymen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:3)**. I have no doubt that included individuals he knew and loved and desired to see come to faith in Christ—his **“heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved” (Romans 10:1)**.

But how it must have grieved the Apostle to see this community—his countrymen who had been snatched by God from all the nations in the world to be God's people—people of whom it was said:

For you *are* a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples (Deuteronomy 7:6, 7).

You or I might be frustrated, but for Paul it brought continual grief in his heart to see his kinsmen walking about in their empty religion, with a history of, and surrounded by, a God-given legacy. They were like children given a priceless gift and choosing instead to play with the box. Paul writes of them:

...who are Israelites, to whom *pertain* the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service *of God*, and the promises; of whom *are* the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ *came*, who is over all, *the* eternally blessed God. Amen (Romans 9:4, 5).

Israelites

As these chapters unfold, we'll examine more precisely the prophetic role of the Israelite according to the flesh. Suffice it so say for now that the extreme responses to Israelites throughout history both have their errors. They should neither be viewed as unique in

their hostility to Christ and Christians nor be understood as God's special treasure of grace while they remain outside of Christ.

On one end of the spectrum, we should not assign to the Israelite through history that special determination found in the contemporary of Christ who conspired to have him killed any more than a contemporary Italian should be coupled with Nero as a psychopathic Christian-killing monster. Yet, at the same time, we do no favor to give those of any particular ethnicity the false assurance that due to the blood which flows through their veins they have elevated status before the living God.

They were Israelites—as if to say, they were the church. Jacob had prayed that they should be called by his name:

...the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth (Genesis 48:16).

Paul refers to them as Israelites, then begins to list the privileges of that designation...**“to whom pertain...”** (*hos*—of whom).

The Adoption

At the top of Paul's list is **“the adoption.”** It is so tempting to bring a shameful scrutiny to the Old Covenant—as if it were one big mistake—as if God were so unnecessarily austere. As if there was something wrong with it! We so happily dismiss it in order to abide in the more loving and less complicated New Covenant. And, no doubt, the New Covenant is certainly superior. But there was nothing wrong with the Old Covenant with its laws, sacrifices, priests and liturgy.

The darkened estate of Paul's countrymen according to the flesh was not due to an inferior religious system imposed upon them by God. Calvin explains:

...the ungodly cannot so contaminate the good endowments of God, but that they always deserve to

be praised and admired: at the same time, those who abuse them acquire thereby nothing but a greater obloquy (blame or discredit).²

A proper grasp of the glorious covenant for the Israelite would reveal the loving, tender and intimate adoption of God.

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son (Exodus 4:22).

That the Jewish contemporaries of Christ had the devil as their father in no way impugns the religious system which had been given to them in great detail by God.

Glory

To the Israelite belonged the glory of God. God was not stingy in His self-revelation. His glory rested on the ark and filled tabernacle.

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34).

And by His glory the Lord led them by day and night through their wanderings (1 Samuel 4:22.).

Covenants

The Israelite was given the benefit of **“the covenants.”** A few words later Paul will include **“the promises.”** I find myself often referring to the covenant as a promise, which I think is essentially true but a bit short in depth. A covenant has stipulations or conditions whereas a promise can simply be given by one person. God made a covenant with Adam, saying, “Do this and live,” which was a covenant of works.

Upon Adam’s failure God, revealed His covenant of grace—the stipulation of which was still obedience—but it would be the

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 9:4). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

obedience of the Second Adam that would fulfill our obligation. And with His victory would come all the promises. This was not unique to the New Covenant. It was the Father's promise from the very beginning, from the fall of man.

One thing that would be unique to the New Covenant would be the international/universal nature of inclusion. To be a stranger to the covenant was synonymous with hopelessness:

...remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12).

The faithful Jew and faithful gentile were to now view themselves as **“one new man” (Ephesians 2:15)**. But Paul's point here is that they always had this. Why/how?

The Giving of the Law

This Good News was brought to the Israelite through **“the giving of the law.”** We tend to think of the law merely as the commandments (there are also those who think it contains everything *but* the commandments). It might be best to understand the **“giving of the law”** as the whole counsel of God—which was the singular prerogative of Israel

He declares His word to Jacob, His statutes and His judgments to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; and *as for His* judgments, they have not known them. Praise the Lord (Psalm 147:19, 20)!

And what great nation *is there* that has *such* statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day (Deuteronomy 4:8)?

The Israelite had been given knowledge from heaven.

Service

They had **“the service of God.”** That is, they had detailed instruction on the specific religious rites which were to be performed in the worship service—in order that all these great riches might be preserved, and God continually glorified in their midst.

From Whom Came Christ

They had the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, the service and they were uniquely chosen as the people through whom Savior of the world would come **“according to the flesh.”** And though some argue the construction of verse 5, it is predominantly (for various reasons) understood to proclaim the deity of Christ—who was an Israelite according to the flesh, and was at the same time **“over all, the eternally blessed God.”** The deity of Christ (that Christ is God over all the world—Jew and gentile alike), so critical to our redemption, was a stumbling block for the Jew with their tribal thinking and ethnic and moral confidence.

We will examine in the weeks to come to what extent these promises to Israel were fulfilled. We will pursue Paul’s apologetic, as it were, that led him to explain (what was no doubt a complaint—one we continue to hear to this day) that God had not kept His promise—that the **“word of God had(has) taken no effect” (Romans 9:6).**

The Warning

But I would like us to conclude this morning by considering this phenomenon—the phenomenon of people surrounded by truth—by *the Truth*—who for one reason or another become spiritual skeletons while surrounded, as it were, by the flesh and blood of God’s promises of Fatherhood, glory, righteousness and worship. This is not a history lesson. In a couple of chapters Paul will warn the church:

Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the

goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in *His* goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off (Romans 11:20-22).

How many churches throughout the course of history have become just what Israel was? Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 25, 5 reads:

The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan.

When it gets right down to it Israel was “**broken off**” because of unbelief. Sometimes the church, in its desire to be meaningful to man, becomes meaningless to God. The central pursuit of these religious institutions is psychological well-being, social or political activism or a relative ethical communal fellowship—these churches want to be anything but religious—they pride themselves in anti-religion and float words like *relationship*, *connection*, *restoration* as the central themes of their ministerial efforts.

Other churches can be more dedicated to a biblical motif or thesis. It is possible to have all the correct liturgical structures, covenantal pronouncements and ethical dictates, but if these things are all not heard in faith—intently—then our involvement in them becomes a testimony against us. And our own church can find itself in danger of becoming the object of sorrow and grief to the truly faithful.

Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in *His* goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off (Romans 11:22).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What happened to the Apostle Paul after his conversion, specifically in regard to his understanding of Israel?
2. What is included under the title of *Israelite*?
3. In what respects is the Old Covenant superior to the New? In what respects are they similar?
4. Would an Israelite have considered God his/her Father?
5. Discuss the relationship of covenants to promises.
6. What is included in the giving of the law?
7. How is today's church in danger of becoming like the Israel during the time of the Apostle Paul?

Romans 9:6-9

The Children of Promise

January 11, 2015

But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: “At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son” (Romans 9:6-9).

But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect (Romans 9:6a).

Has The Word Failed?

During my early evangelistic efforts, when I first recognized a strong call in my heart to bring forth the message of Christ as I had heard it from others, I became a member of a Christian organization that focused in that direction. This organization had been started by a Christian man with an able business background. He had developed a series of methods that were very effective in encouraging the correct response to the gospel, the way one might sell a product they truly believed in. The organization was tremendously successful.

In this evangelistic arsenal was a thing called the “proven talk.” The proven talk was a presentation of the gospel that demonstrated success in the conversion of others. The higher profile members of the organization had developed series of proven talks which would garner a high rate of response from an audience who would indicate (usually on a card of some sort handed to them) an affirmative response to the message.

I hope I don’t sound over cynical. There is a certain value in grasping how people might respond to the way you speak with them. Budding ministers study homiletics in an effort to master the art of preaching.

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person (Colossians 4:6).

The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness (Proverbs 16:21).

Yet at the same time we are warned against “**flattering lips**” and a tongue that “**makes great boasts**” (Psalm 12:2, 3). “**They take pleasure in falsehood. They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse**” (Psalm 62:4).

All this to say that there is a great danger in approaching the faith so pragmatically. We want a faith that works. We want to see our churches grow, our families thrive, our economics flourish, our friendships blossom, our culture enriched. Yet at the same time we must recognize that our vision for what our faith should produce may not comport with God’s vision—either in its outward production or as it relates to His hidden counsel.

Giving a brief summary of his ministerial efforts, the Apostle Paul writes:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things (2 Corinthians 2:14-16)?

Would a proven talk pass muster if it proved to be “**a fragrance from death to death**” among those who are perishing? What if a wife brought her husband to church in hopes of elevating their marriage only to find that it made things worse? What if preaching the gospel shrunk your church, caused strife in your family, depleted you economically, ruined your friendships and resulted in cultural pandemonium? Would the word of God have (as it says in the ESV) “**failed**”?

Things were unfolding in the New Covenant church that led the Apostle Paul to write almost as an apologist for the word of God. There was an expectation, especially among the Jews and Jewish Christians, which was not fleshing out the way they had anticipated. And because it was not going the way they thought it should, they began to conclude that there was something wrong with God's word.

But they had misread and misunderstood the plan of redemption presented in the Old Testament Scriptures. Even further, they had a flawed grasp of God Himself—especially the prerogatives He would exercise as God—decrees that could only rightly be assigned to the One that we, as creatures, refer to as God. *What decisions does God have the right to make?* This will be pursued later in the chapter. But for now, *what was the fundamental misunderstanding Paul would address?*

For they *are* not all Israel who *are* of Israel (Romans 9:6).

At the fall of man, God revealed His covenant of grace—that the seed of the woman would crush the head of seed of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). That great promise, that glorious covenant, would be more specifically expressed to Abraham—that through the seed of Abraham would come a great nation—a preserved and protected people—and the source of untold blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:2, 3). Through Abraham came Israel, and virtually the entire Old Testament is a record of that covenant of grace (and its attending promises) blossoming with Israel as the beneficiary:

- Israel was promised the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27)
- Israel had been promised a future resurrection (Ezekiel 37)
- Israel was God's son (Exodus 4:22)
- An inheritance was promised to Israel (Isaiah 60)
- Israel was God's chosen people (Amos 3:2)
- God had promised never to forsake Israel (Deuteronomy 31:6)

But in just one chapter the Apostle Paul takes these manifold blessings and places them right in the bosom of the church:

- The church is where we see the Spirit of God at work (Romans 8:4)

- The church is promised the resurrection (Romans 8:10-11)
- The church—believers in Christ—are sons and daughters (Romans 8:14-17)
- The church—believers in Christ—are the “joint heirs” with Christ (Romans 8:17)
- The church—believers in Christ—are now given this blessed designation of God’s chosen people (Roman 8:29-30)
- The church—the believer in Christ—is the one who can have the assurance that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:39)

Had God not kept His promise? Had the word of God failed? Not at all! God had made a promise to Israel and He will most assuredly keep it. Nothing is amiss with God’s promise. The people merely failed to understand to whom the promise had been made.

Hence the phrase: **“For they are not all Israel who are of Israel.”** The problem is not the promise; the problem (at least here) is to whom they thought the promise was made. There is Israel, and then there is *Israel*. There is Israel according to the flesh, and then there is Israel according to the promise.

One is hard-pressed to think of a greater error than a misapprehension of how one finds favor with God. And one of the most insidious errors is the notion that favor is found by virtue of inclusion in a community—whether the community is religious or ethnic in its makeup. For the Jews during the time of Christ, it was both.

Early in the gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist summarily dismisses the notion that one can appeal to their ethnic or religious ancestry as something that will grant them heavenly respect:

And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham (Matthew 3:9).

A similar dialogue is had with Jesus Himself:

They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s

children, you would be doing the works Abraham did” (John 8:39).

Jesus goes on to say:

“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44).

In Revelation 2:9 and 3:9, Jesus dispels the value of ethnicity and its attending community as being inherently profitable before God. He speaks of those **“who say they are Jews are not.”**

What Paul was writing should not have taken the attentive readers by surprise. In Romans 2:11, Paul succinctly stated what should be obvious to anyone, that there is **“no respect of persons with God” (Romans 2:11 KJV)**. It is a funny little phrase *ou gar estim prosopolempsia para to theo*—nor for is receiving face with the God—literally to “accept a face.” There is no bringing your face into the presence of God.

When it comes to finding favor with God, God is not impressed with your relatives or even your ecclesiastical connections. The real question we need to ask ourselves is: “Am I a child of God’s promise?”

Paul now begins his Bible study to show how it had always been this way:

...nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: “At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son” (Romans 9:7-9).

Isaac: A Child of Promise

Paul appeals to one of the most well-known stories in the Old Testament. Even though Paul’s audience likely all knew the story, the heart of the message had been lost on many of them.

In short, God had made a promise to Abraham that through his seed all the world would be blessed. But Abraham and Sarah were

past child bearing age, so they took matters into their own hands and Abraham had a child through Sarah's servant, Hagar. That child's name was Ishmael.

Here you have what you might call a conceptual Babel—man's effort at reaching heaven. It may not have been as blatantly innovative as the Tower of Babel. After all, Abraham and Sarah were merely helping God with God's plan, whereas Babel was entirely a human idea. Nonetheless, what we see with Abraham, Sarah and Hagar is a seminally synergistic method of achieving redemption (instead of constructing a tower, they would construct a savior): God would do His part by making the plan; Sarah would do her part by suggesting the implementation; Abraham would do his part; and, I'm guessing, a somewhat reticent Hagar would do her part.

But I am hoping we can all see that God did not need their help. God had made a promise and is quite capable of keeping the promises He makes—even when it looks quite impossible to us. Very early on in the bosom of the Old Covenant church you see what amounts to be a functional Arminianism—people operating in a form of faith while establishing a religious system built upon the efforts of God *plus* the effort or contribution of man.

This is the obvious error Paul addresses. No one was saved through the seed of Ishmael—even though Ishmael was a child of Abraham. Someone, at this point, might argue: “Yes, but his mother was an Egyptian!” And that objection will be dismantled in the verses to come. Suffice it to say for now the plan of salvation, revealed in the history of redemption, was that true children of God are begotten by promise.

Even in the Old Covenant, being part of the visible kingdom of Israel did not assure a soul that they were part of the invisible church (the true believers). Someone might observe that the word “chosen” or “elect” *eklektos* is often assigned to the entire nation of Israel, as it is to the entire church. And there is certainly a sense in which the entire nation or church can be addressed as a chosen, elect and holy people.

It is indeed an illustrious example of gratuitous mercy, when God deigns to make a covenant of life with a nation: but his hidden favor appears more

evident in that second election, which is confined to a part only.³

There is nothing wrong with the word of God. It has not failed in the least. It was always by the promise of God and the power of God that sinners would have peace with God. And if the promise has appeared to have failed it is due to our lack of appreciating what the promise is and to whom the promise is made—the true Israel of God.

“At This Time I Will Come”

The plan was always one of promise. Paul completes this particular thought with a reference to the events recorded in Genesis 18: **“At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son.”**

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son” (Genesis 18:11-14).

It is by the power of God alone that the plan of redemption would be accomplished, and it is by the power of God alone that the plan of redemption would be applied. And it is not applied by virtue of ethnicity or even religious community, but by *faith*.

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham (Galatians 3:7).

...so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Galatians 3:14).

³ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 9:6). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

We can take comfort in our baptism only if we have faith in that to which the baptism points. We can have blessed assurance when we come to the Lord's Table only when we believe in that to which the elements direct us. Let that be the meditation of our hearts as we come to the table this morning.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are the dangers of measuring the success of evangelism too pragmatically?
2. Has the word of God not produced what you thought it would in your life? Explain.
3. What problem was Paul addressing in terms of God's promises to Israel? Discuss how Israel and the church are interwoven.
4. What does it mean that God does not respect persons?
5. How were the actions of Abraham and Sarah with Hagar similar to the Tower of Babel?
6. Discuss how "chosen" or "elect" might apply to a group or to an individual.
7. How does one truly receive the blessings promised to Abraham?

Romans 9:10-13

Jacob I Have Loved, But Esau I Have Hated – Part I
January 18, 2015

And not only *this*, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, *even* by our father Isaac (for *the children* not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, “*The older shall serve the younger.*” As it is written, “*Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated*” (Romans 9:10-13).

Introduction—What’s at Stake?

As many of you are aware, the portion of Scripture we currently find ourselves examining (especially this particular chapter) is a flagship text for the doctrines of grace, the sovereignty of God, election, predestination—theological distinctives at the heart of Calvinism and Reformed Theology. We certainly will, in an effort to be true to God’s word, dig into these things. But let us be mindful of why the Apostle wrote these chapters—*what was at stake?*

The thematic verse of this entire section (chapters 9-11) appears, in my estimation, to be Romans 9:6a, “**But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect.**” (*Ouch hoion de hot ekpeptoken ho logos tou theou—Not such but that has fallen out the word of the God.*) And if that is the theme of the section, the driving force behind the theme is Paul’s love and concern for the souls of his fellow-Israelite according to the flesh.

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3).

And again we shall see:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved (Romans 10:1).

We think of a pastor or, in this case, an apostle, writing a message to the people of God, and we might think of him in a library or his study and well we should. But we should also think of him in a prison (from which Paul penned many letters) or at a funeral or graveyard or an intensive care unit, looking into the eyes of a friend whose very soul was in danger of being lost forever.

What is at the fore of the Apostle's heart/message when considering the eternal welfare of those for whom he had such great love? It is an elevation of the faithfulness of the word of God, especially as it speaks to an expanded apprehension of the divine prerogatives of God—the pleasure, the purpose, the power, the will and the decrees of God. What we read in this section is Paul elevating these things to an uncomfortable shelf—so high that it causes the natural mind to reel and even to bark in its discomfort.

The Natural Objections/Questions—The Unsearchable Answer

We can see how true this is by the objections/questions Paul anticipates:

But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect (Romans 9:6).

What shall we say then? *Is there* unrighteousness with God (Romans 9:14)?

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will” (Romans 9:19)?

Paul does not ignore the natural (or even some regenerate) mind's reaction. He knows the difficulty and addresses it. If this teaching does not, at some level, at first blush, bring these very questions to our minds, then we do not properly understand what the apostle is teaching. It is no surprise that this section culminates with the doxological outburst:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out (Romans 11:33)!

The doctrine Paul presents is not unreasonable, but it is unsearchable (some have such difficulty with that distinction). **“Unsearchable”** *anexerauneta* means unfathomable. Because the sea is deeper than my instruments can reach does not mean the sea is unreasonable or that my measuring device is inaccurate—it simply means it does not go that deep. And it is man’s lack of willingness to acknowledge this fact that leads him (both Christian and non-Christian alike) into untold folly.

A Critical Issue

Recently, my fifteen-year-old son had friends (not all were Christians) over and they sat at a fire in the backyard, talking for a very long time. When my son came in, I asked what they were talking about. He said they were talking about predestination and wanted some clarification on it. People are confused about it. They want to talk about it. It is sadly so often avoided in the church. One professor of mine told me that he couldn’t think of anything less valuable to talk about.

But the Apostle Paul, in the very heart of his grand epistle, his magnum opus, the closest thing we have to a systematic theology in all of Scripture, finds the issue eminently critical.

The divines of Westminster (Chapter 3, 8) offered this:

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, (Rom. 9:20, Rom. 11:33, Deut. 29:29) that men, attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. (2 Pet. 1:10) So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; (Eph. 1:6, Rom. 11:33) and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all

that sincerely obey the Gospel. (Rom. 11:5, 6, 20, 2 Pet. 1:10, Rom. 8:33, Luke 10:20)⁴

The teaching of predestination should be handled prudently, but it should not be avoided. This doctrine is at the heart of Paul's apologetic for the faithfulness of God's word. When the sovereign election of God is dismissed in salvation, men will seek to fill the void, inevitably with works of some sort; either that or the entire subject of the power of the atoning work of Christ falls of the radar.

A Christian man recently contacted me vexed by the direction of his church. He asked me to listen to a sermon that he felt represented a trend. The sermon had no law (at least in the true sense of the word) and it had no gospel. The sermon amounted to tips on how to access God in such a way as to have a successful 2015. The speaker offered a quasi-biblical presentation of how to improve your finances, marriages, business relationships. The congregation, according to this preacher, needed to think bigger in order to get more.

Paul seems to have a different goal in light of God's glory and man's redemption. According to him, we are to have greater faith that God's word will accomplish what God has set out for it to do—even if it does not comport with our personal wishes. We are to abandon our paltry and shallow understanding of the depth to which God's choices reach. And I daresay there is not a passage in all of Scripture that will challenge us in this category more than the one that is before us this morning.

And not only *this*, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, *even* by our father Isaac (for *the children* not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "*The older shall serve the younger.*" As it is written, "*Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated*" (Romans 9:10-13).

⁴ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Always By Promise

I realize this has been a long introduction, but the passage, though challenging, is not difficult. Answering the anticipated objection that the promises made to Israel seem now to be found in the bosom of the church (issues we covered last time), he taught how it had always been by virtue of God's promises and not by ethnicity that favor with God is found. It was not by Ishmael (even though he was of the flesh of Abraham) but by Isaac that the children of the promise are counted as the seed—as true children of God.

It was always by God's power and promise that sinful man would find peace with God, not by ethnicity or ecclesiastical community. But if someone were to object that Ishmael's mother was an Egyptian, Paul proceeds to put forth an example where no distinction whatsoever can be made.

Rebecca, by one man, Isaac, conceived twins. So now in this theological control group, all the variables are dismissed. And we shall find that, in the end, there is only one ultimate distinction—one distinction conveyed in three parts—the election *eklogen* (to make a choice), the purpose *prothesis* (to purpose or plan in advance) and the calling *kalountos* (to effectually summon) of God.

It should not be surprising that for many people (including many Christian people) this is hard to accept. It was in the midst of a similar teaching by Jesus in the sixth chapter of John that we read:

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it” (John 6:60)?

And because it is a “**hard saying**” *skleros logos*, I think we should address some objections or efforts made to explain away or accommodate our natural resistance to such a teaching.

First, **we cannot appeal to the ethnic lineage.** They have the same father and mother.

We cannot appeal to one being the primogeniture. The first-born normally have the privileged status. Jacob was the younger.

We cannot appeal to works. We cannot appeal to works of any kind (whether moral or religious) because neither had done good or evil. Appealing to works that God knew they would do turns the

apostle's argument on its head and wars against the very point he makes.

We cannot appeal to corporate election. To appeal to corporate election (the choosing of a nation, as in Genesis 25:23) rather than individual election ignores that a group is always composed of individuals (and the distinction between Jacob and Esau was not corporate since they were both of the same outward body—both circumcised members of God's covenant family). Add to that how chapter 10 concerns itself with salvation of individuals (Romans 10:14-17). Add to that the distinction Paul makes in **Romans 11:5 and 7**: “**So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace...What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened.**” Paul makes the distinction between the corporately elected and the individually elected. Add to that the numerous passages which speak of calling, choosing and electing of individuals for salvation (Romans 8:28; Ephesians 1:11, 12; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 4:4, 5).

We cannot appeal to the words *love* and *hatred* meaning something less than the full force of those words. Certainly these words are used in Scripture to illustrate a preference rather than severe dislike.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26).

Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life (John 12:25).

So even if we grant that the words do not contain intense vitriol, we are still left with the fact that God chooses one and leaves the other to his own sinful devices.

We cannot appeal to the common argument (which Paul will address shortly) that this negates man's responsibility. We tread on very dangerous ground when we play this game with God—like a rebellious child trumpeting to his parent that he did not ask to be born. It is the height of hubris for a man to say to God that since

my mind cannot plumb the depths of your sovereignty, I feel no need to acknowledge your sovereignty or seek to obey your commands. As I said, Paul addresses this in a few verses, but he had already contended with a similar objection back in chapter three.

In a passage where the faithfulness of God is brought into question (similar to the one before us) Paul indicates that the unbelief of man is not an indictment against the faithfulness of God.

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world? For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner? And *why* not say, “Let us do evil that good may come”?—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just (Romans 3:5-8).

The argument goes something like this: *The righteousness of God is elevated by contrast in light of my unrighteousness, so the more unrighteous I am the more the righteousness of God becomes apparent. This seems to be what God wants, so I guess I’m okay.* Paul’s simple, two-fold response is that God will “**judge the world**” and that “**their condemnation if just.**” It would be like Judas arguing that his betrayal has brought redemption to the world, so how could he be considered a son of perdition? This would be ridiculous.

What Shall We Say Then?

I pray you are not weary of the theological argumentation. There will be much more to come in the weeks ahead. It might do us well to briefly look ahead to Paul’s aim. After pressing his instruction on God’s divine prerogatives Paul stops to ask a rhetorical question:

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not

attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame” (Romans 9:30-33).

We may not fully comprehend the depths of the correct answer of God’s sovereignty in our salvation, but it appears that Paul’s goal is to help us understand the folly of the alternatives. Israel was pursuing the law of righteousness—**“seeking to establish their own” righteousness (Romans 10:3)**. What Paul’s teaching does is close every door but the door of faith in Christ (John 10:9). It vanquishes every fig leaf (Genesis 3:7). It crumbles every tower (Genesis 11). We cease to ask **“who will ascend to heaven or descend into the abyss”** (assuming the “who” means who is good enough or who is evil enough). Questions like that of the rich young ruler **“Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life” (Matthew 19:16)?** are exposed as folly.

This teaching of Paul culminates with our hands over our mouths, our counting of all our good deeds as **“rubbish” (Philippians 3:8)** and we are left with utter, complete and unique dependence upon Him who others would consider a stumbling stone to their religion.

So when all the variables of the **“blood...the will of the flesh (and) the will of man” (John 1:12)** are removed, Paul leaves us with the election *eklogen* (to make a choice), the purpose *prothesis* (to purpose of plan in advance) and the calling *kalountos* (to effectually summon) of God. These things will be the topic of our study in our next meeting.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. The ninth chapter of Romans is highly controversial. Why do you suppose the Apostle Paul wrote it? What was at stake?
2. What are some of the natural questions Romans 9 brings out? Have you asked them? Have you heard others ask them? How do you generally answer?
3. What does it mean that God's judgments are unsearchable?
4. Should predestination be avoided as a topic of discussion in the church because it is so mysterious?
5. What appears to be the Apostle Paul's goal(s) in this chapter?
6. Why does the Apostle Paul bring up the example of Rebecca and the twins? What is the flow of his argument?
7. What are some natural objections/explanations of this teaching? Do they provide a reasonable alternative?
8. What seems to be the Apostle Paul's aim in light of Romans 9:30-33?

Romans 9:10-13

Jacob I Have Loved, But Esau I Have Hated – Part II
January 25, 2015

And not only *this*, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, *even* by our father Isaac (for *the children* not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, “*The older shall serve the younger.*” As it is written, “*Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated*” (Romans 9:10-13).

What Would You Write?

If you found yourself in a religious climate where people were questioning the veracity or faithfulness of God’s word, what would you write about? If you surveyed your many friends only to find that the great majority of them were in such egregious error regarding their spiritual convictions that their souls were in danger of being lost forever, what would be the topic of your essay?

It is no stretch to say this has been a common condition of cultures throughout the ages. But what makes the Apostle Paul’s situation somewhat similar to ours is that he is not writing to an entirely un-evangelized society. His readers, for the most part, had either a deep or at least cursory familiarity with the word of God. So what would you pick as a topic?

Let us be reminded that the faithfulness of God’s word—really, of God Himself—is what is in question and, subsequently, the spiritual welfare of people who the Apostle Paul loved very deeply. We see this in Romans 9:6a, 9:1-3 and 10:1.

But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect (Romans 9:6a).

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were

accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3).

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved (Romans 10:1).

Again, what would you write about given this environment? What does the Apostle write about? He certainly doesn't take the hammer and chisel to God in an effort to make Him more accessible to these mistaken religious convictions. In love, the Apostle tells the truth: **"Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (Romans 9:6b)**. Paul makes it clear that the problem is not God and His promises, the problem is your religion and what you mistakenly think approves you before God.

And couched between two impassioned expressions of Paul's great love for his countrymen in 9:1-3 and 10:1, we see Paul launch into a lesson that I suspect very few of us would view as relevant in light of one's concern for the lost. He begins to write about choices made by God, what theologians call *God's Eternal Decrees* and what John Calvin called the *decretum horrible* or the horrible decrees. Horrible did not have the same meaning for the 16th century theologian as it has for us today. What he meant by horrible was 'awe inspiring.' Horrible is from *horrere* meaning to tremble.

Trembling

In some sense the decrees (choices) of God should cause us to tremble. It is a difficult teaching and requires a mature understanding to grasp that trembling before God is the road to peace. As Habakkuk wrote in light of God's decrees:

I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me...yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places (Habakkuk 3:16, 18-19).

In light of the above passage, it has been said:

The true and only path to *rest* is through such fear. Whoever is securely torpid (apathetic) and hardened towards God, will be tumultuously agitated in the day of affliction, and so will bring on himself a worse destruction; but he who in time meets God's wrath and trembles at His threats, prepares the best *rest* for himself in the day of affliction.⁵

It is difficult to tremble at a God who is presented more and more (as is so often today) as a sweater-clad infomercial host rather than the King of kings, Lord of lords, Judge and Ruler.

The Apostle, in his defense of God's word and love for his neighbor, would not present a benign, less imposing God who would fit more nicely into the contours of fallen humanity and their mistaken notions of their own needs and even greater mistaken notions of the answer.

No, the Apostle presents a God who makes choices, which then causes his readers to question God's very righteousness and justice:

What shall we say then? *Is there unrighteousness with God (Romans 9:14)?*

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will" (Romans 9:19)?

Removing All Human Equations

It has been said that eternal choices are made in the hidden chambers of eternity. This is what the Apostle teaches. Paul had brought to the somewhat learned readers some points in Scripture that

⁵ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997) *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 706). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

had escaped their notice—how often do certain scriptural claims conveniently escape our notice!

We are taught that Rebecca, by Isaac, had the twins Jacob and Esau, and that before they were born or had done good or evil, God had determined that the older would serve the younger. He also quotes the very disconcerting Malachi 2:2 and 3: **“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”**

With the skill of a surgeon and the force of a jack-hammer, Paul removes from the equation anything found in man that can somehow approve him before God. People will often still seek to find something in Jacob—a condition that would put him on some type of elevated status that would make him the more reasonable object of God’s affection. But when you read a passage like this, it’s almost as if any argument you make is less powerful than merely reading the passage again. They had the same parents, they were both still in the womb, and they had done no good or evil. What more can be said?

From a creaturely perspective, this type of declaration would be capricious at best and madness at worst. We would likely consider a person out of his mind if he were to declare love for one twin and hatred for the other before they were yet born. And many detractors of the Christian faith have little problem hurling invective epithets toward a God who would deign to make such arbitrary choices. There is a ‘who does God think He is’ lobe in the sinful human brain that is rapidly becoming emboldened in our land.

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done” (Daniel 4:35)?

Who Would You Prefer

“What have you done?” *You pick one over the other?* That is the anticipated objection. *Who has the right to make such choices?* Maybe we should ask ourselves who we would prefer to be behind the choices, if not God. Would we prefer luck, chance, some form of pure randomness? Would we prefer nature—the natural course of molecules flying through space which today happens to knock on

your brain in such a way as to force air through your lungs and across your larynx uttering a ‘yes’ to God? Would we prefer it be left to the will of man, recognizing that there is not a man on earth who, according to his own nature, would say yes to the gospel?

Paul, in step with the testimony of all Scripture, clears the decks of anything any man (anything we can do or offer) to become a child of God. It is “**not of blood**” and not by our ethnic lineage. It is not “**the will of the flesh**” and not by our natural inclination. It is not “**the will of man,**” not even by our overcoming of our natural inclinations, “**but of God**” (John 1:13).⁶

Now that the decks have been cleared of human contribution—now that all the variables found in man’s comparison with other men have been removed—what is left? Paul, almost parenthetically, gives the threefold answer.

For *the children* not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls (Romans 9:11).

We are left with the “**purpose,**” “**election**” and “**call**” of God.

Purpose

First, we see “**purpose**” *prothesis*. The word means that which is planned in advance. We are fond, in the Christian community, of saying that God has a plan. Some of our favorite and most comforting passages in the Bible tell us this very thing.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11).

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose (Romans 8:28).

⁶ There are various interpretations of what is specifically meant by the “blood...will of flesh...will of man.” What is clear is that it is nothing coming from man. We should not read a verse like John 1:13 in such a way as to add something we think John is allowing regarding how one becomes a child of God.

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself (Ephesians 1:7-9).

So, God has a plan. There is a divine purpose behind all things, even human choices.

The king's heart *is* in the hand of the Lord, *like* the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes (Proverbs 21:1).

Furthermore, we learn that, upon deeper analysis, there is a reason or condition for the plans or purposes of God. It is according to His **“good pleasure.”** People perhaps tend to look for a more utilitarian or man-centered reason for the events of life. Perhaps our minds can grapple for a moment with the notion that if (and by “if” I mean “since”) there is an all-wise, all-powerful, all-present, all-knowing, omni-benevolent (all-good) God, what could be a greater reason for the plans of the course of history than that which is pleasing to Him?

Election

And it is in accordance with God's plan and pleasure that He elects. **“Election”** *eklogen* simply means to select, to make a choice. In the hidden chambers of eternity, God has made choices, decrees, which remain hidden from us until they are unveiled in their moment. One critical aspect of God's decrees, especially as it speaks to election, is that no one is the elect of God because of some inherent quality found in themselves—rather, it is **“not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil”** that we are told.

...who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own

purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began (2 Timothy 1:9).

In this knowledge we are rescued (or at least should be) from boasting:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast (Ephesians 2:8, 9).*

It is not merely that we shouldn't boast; we have no room or cause for boasting.

This also affords us the blessed assurance of knowing that our inclusion among the favored of God was not dependent upon some quality or virtue found in me that I had better maintain. If a man marries a woman because she is physically beautiful, slender, or because of her hair or eyes—or even because she has an upbeat and cheerful disposition, what conclusion will she draw when she can no longer maintain those attributes at a sufficient level, but that the very thing he loved is no longer found and therefore the love is withdrawn?

This is not the kind of love God bestows upon His elect. He chose to love us while every fiber of our being was in rebellion (Romans 5:8). He chose to love us for no assignable cause except His own good pleasure. How greatly this informs what true love is. And when we dispose of this unconditional election, how it deforms not only God's love for us but our understanding of love in general!

And how this knowledge transforms and elevates our praise and worship! It casts our righteousness (if it can even be called righteousness—Isaiah 64:6) into the deepest well of darkness and elevates our understanding of the grace, love and mercy of God beyond the heavens. Worship becomes a marvel.

Much more can be said of the transformational richness of bowing our hearts before the unconditional election of God. But let us finish by examining whether or not we are the objects of such grace. God has a plan, He has His elect and He **“calls”** them.

Call

What does it mean to be “called” *kalountos* of God? There are a variety of callings in the Scriptures. There is the outward call—the preaching of the word and call to believe and repent—“**Many are called, but few are chosen**” (Matthew 22:14). There is a vocational call—a call to an office—“**Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle**” (Romans 1:1). But what Paul is writing of in Romans 9:11 is an inward call. It is an effectual call—it produces its desired effect. Paul knew the Thessalonians had been called because of how they responded to the gospel:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake (1 Thessalonians 1:4, 5).

The effectual call is power, and through the Holy Spirit it produces “**full conviction.**” Question 67 of the Larger Westminster Catechism explains it this way:

Effectual calling is the work of God's almighty power and grace, whereby (out of his free and special love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto) he doth, in his accepted time, invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by his word and Spirit; savingly enlightening their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein.

There is a story in Ezekiel 37 which conveys in a very vivid way how this effectual calling works. As we finish with this story, perhaps it will be helpful to understand the “bones” to be the sinful and spiritually dead condition of the human soul and the “prophecy”

to be the preaching of the word and ministry of the sacraments and prayers of the saints.

The hand of the Lord came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it *was* full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, *there were* very many in the open valley; and indeed *they were* very dry. And He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” So I answered, “O Lord God, You know.” Again He said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I *am* the Lord.” ’ ” So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but *there was* no breath in them. Also He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” ’ ” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I *am* the Lord, when I have opened your

graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken *it* and performed *it*,” says the Lord (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

As we go to the Lord’s Table, let us pray that by the power and good pleasure of God, sinews and flesh would come upon bones, that there would be a covering of skin and that God would breathe life into otherwise morbid souls. And may those who have already called upon His Name have an elevated sense of praise because of a renewed understanding of the darkness from which we have been delivered.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. In an environment where the word of God is questioned and souls are in peril of being lost, what would you choose to write about?
2. What are God's Eternal Decrees and why are they "horrible"?
3. Why do you suppose men today do not tremble before God?
4. What are the natural questions that the teaching of the Apostle Paul leads people to ask?
5. What does Paul remove from the equation by using the example of Jacob and Esau?
6. What are some reasons people offer for why decisions are made?
7. Does God have a plan? How certain is it?
8. What is behind God's purpose? Is that sufficient? Why or why not?
9. What does "election" mean? Why does God elect certain people unto salvation and not others?
10. What does a proper understanding of unconditional election produce in us?
11. What are the different kinds of calling? What is effectual calling?
12. What is the means by which effectual calling is applied? What does effectual calling produce in a person? Have you been effectually called?

Romans 9:14-18

Life Interrupted: Unrighteousness With God? – Part I

February 8, 2015

What shall we say then? *Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.”*¹⁶ So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, “*For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.*” Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens (Romans 9:14-18).

Life Interrupted

When I was eight years, old the president of the United States was assassinated. I wasn't quite mature enough to grasp the gravity of the event. Sadly, the one thing I remember most clearly was the announcer on the television saying: “We interrupt this show to bring you coverage of the presidential assassination.” I wanted to watch my cartoons, but all that was on was on every station was coverage of the assassination.

Every now and then our lives get interrupted. Maybe an appliance in our house stops working or our car won't start. So we have to make adjustments. We have to find things, like a warrantee or a phone number to a good mechanic. We might call these types of interruptions a minor inconvenience.

But sometimes the interruptions are major and the adjustments very difficult. Households fall apart, we lose jobs, we lose our loved ones—according to some sources, the United States was involved in over twenty wars (or international conflicts) in the twentieth century alone—so our lives are often interrupted by wars and natural disasters.

And the adjustments we must make to these major interruptions can involve a great deal of soul-searching. We have to reevaluate (or perhaps evaluate for the first time) who we are, why we

are here, what is the source of our strength and ethics. And sometimes we ask *what is the point?*

I am under the conviction that the biggest interruption the world has ever known was the incarnation—the eternal Son of God becoming flesh—the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. In 1926, the pastor Dr. James Allen Francis wrote a sermon from which a poem was later extracted—a poem about Jesus which became very popular, entitled *One Solitary Life*. It reads:

He was born in an obscure village
The child of a peasant woman
He grew up in another obscure village
Where he worked in a carpenter shop
Until he was thirty when public opinion turned against him

He never wrote a book
He never held an office
He never went to college
He never visited a big city
He never travelled more than two hundred miles
From the place where he was born
He did none of the things
Usually associated with greatness
He had no credentials but himself

He was only thirty three

His friends ran away
One of them denied him
He was turned over to his enemies
And went through the mockery of a trial
He was nailed to a cross between two thieves
While dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing
The only property he had on earth

When he was dead
He was laid in a borrowed grave
Through the pity of a friend
Nineteen centuries have come and gone

And today Jesus is the central figure of the human race
And the leader of mankind's progress
All the armies that have ever marched
All the navies that have ever sailed
All the parliaments that have ever sat
All the kings that ever reigned put together
Have not affected the life of mankind on earth
As powerfully as that one solitary life

Jesus was the interruption of the ages, one that could not be ignored. His claims to be the King of kings and Lord of lords and the only means by which man can find peace with God were the most exclusive and closed-minded statements in history. The proclamation of His deity lays its claims upon the lives of all humanity. All things come into being from Him, they exist through Him and are directed toward Him (Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 8:6).

And there was no more significant culture of people to whom Jesus was an interruption than His own people—the covenant people of God—the Jews. **“He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).** Jesus was a **“stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense” (Romans 9:33).** Heaven help us when the true Jesus of Scripture gets in the way of our religious pursuits!

The covenant people of God—the people of God’s promise (Israel)—believed those promises were exclusively for them: the promise of the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27), the promise of a future resurrection (Ezekiel 37), the designation of God’s son (Exodus 4:22), the promise of an inheritance (Isaiah 60), the promise of being the chosen people of God (Amos 3:2) and the promise that they would never be forsaken (Deuteronomy 31:6).

But in one short chapter, the Apostle Paul takes the glorious promises and assigns them to the church—to those who believe in Jesus. The church is where we see the Spirit of God (Romans 8:4), the church is promised the resurrection (Romans 8:10, 11), the church (the believer in Christ) are sons and daughters (Romans 8:14-17), the church (the believer in Christ) are the “joint heirs” with Christ (Romans 8:17), the church (the believer in Christ) is now given the blessed designation of God’s chosen (Romans 8:29-30) and the church (the believer in Christ) is the one who can have the blessed

assurance that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39).

For several hundred years the Lord had been silent and the covenant people of God (Israel) slowly coasted away, uninterrupted, from the true message of the true Messiah through whom all the promises would find their fulfillment. **“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him (Christ)” (2 Corinthians 1:20).**

Then came the magnificent interruption, and major adjustments were in order. But the adjustments were not the establishing of something new, but a proper understanding of what already was. Favor and peace with God was always (in both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant) found in Christ—it was always by the power and promise of God. In a sort of remedial instruction, Paul highlights what they should have already known: Even though Ishmael was the first born of Abraham (and should have had the natural right of preeminence), the promise came through Isaac.

Rebecca had twins (with no distinction whatsoever—they had not yet done good or evil), but God made a choice that the older shall serve the younger. Then we scratch our heads as Paul would quote Scripture (Malachi 1:2, 3) for his next point: **“Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated” (Romans 9:13).**

The Apostle stops here in anticipation of an objection.

What shall we say then? *Is there* unrighteousness with God? Certainly not (Romans 9:14)!

Unrighteousness with God?

If this is where our mind naturally went, we must be reading Paul correctly. The Nihilist, the skeptic, the naturalist, the existentialist, the absurdist, the perennialist, the Arminian, would not ask this question. They would either deny that there is a God, thus removing from the equation any authoritative definition of righteousness at all, or transfer the attributes of deity (godhood) from God to man.

The question would never occur to the unbeliever because there is no God to be unrighteous, and it would not occur to those who believe in a libertarian understanding of free will because God has left

man, more or less, on his own when it comes to making the right choice. So, Christian, why is it you have made the correct choice?

Paul is a merciless instructor. You would think that after the hard teachings of Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau, he would let us come up for air. But he, instead, presses the issue. They had forgotten what the Bible said about God's mercy and compassion, so Paul will remind them.

During the Exodus, when the people who God had delivered had built a golden calf and engaged in sin and debauchery, Moses stood before God to intercede for them—much the way Christ would intercede for us. It was during this intercession—where God would reveal a portion of His glory in the cleft of the rock—that God informed Moses of His divine prerogative (Exodus 33:19).

For He says to Moses, “*I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion*” (Romans 9:15).

I Will Have Mercy

For the learned student, they would immediately understand the context of this statement by God taking place in the midst of utter rebellion—and rebellion by people to whom God had already exercised the goodness of extraction of 400 years of slavery. Instead of the goodness, forbearance and longsuffering of God leading to repentance (Romans 2:4), they exercised their liberty to create and follow false gods—gods that would (at least in their minds) have the strength to deliver them, but not require holiness of life—a strong but mindless bull calf.

So how does this answer Paul's anticipated objection, that God is unrighteous? Truly this teaching is disturbing to the flesh. We vomit out our questions, seeking to call God to give an account. Calvin aptly states:

Monstrous surely is the madness of the human mind, that it is more disposed to charge God with unrighteousness than to blame itself for blindness.⁷

⁷ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 9:14). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

It was in the context of recognizing that condemnation would have been the just move that Paul reminds his readers that God chose instead to exercise mercy. God's righteousness is trumpeted in observing that God chose to exercise mercy at all. Schreiner writes:

No human being deserves his mercy. The choice of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau must be construed as a merciful one. In other words, the stunning thing for Paul was not that God rejected Ishmael and Esau but that he chose Isaac and Jacob, for they did not deserve to be included in his merciful and gracious purposes. Human beings are apt to criticize God for excluding anyone, but this betrays a theology that views salvation as something God "ought" to bestow on all equally.⁸

Justice or Mercy?

When we pose these objections, we forget our position. It was a mere chapter and a half ago that Paul testified of his wretched condition before God (Romans 7:24). And in five chapters he will write of the peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). He knew what he deserved and he had seen firsthand what he would receive (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). Is God unrighteous because He doesn't save all men? Is He unfair, unjust? It is not a difficult wager that when the Apostle beheld the holiness of God, the last thing on earth (or heaven) that he would cry for is justice. Grace and mercy is our greatest need and it is God's ample gift in Christ.

Truly a passage like this is a great interruption. It changes everything: our understanding of God, of ourselves, of our sin, of what we deserve and what we receive. If all things are **"of Him and through Him and to Him"** (Romans 11:36), that would include us. It is difficult for sinful creatures to think this way. Yet it is the source of untold blessings—a never-ending fountain!

In light of this, Paul puts to rest (at least, he seeks to) one of the great examples of creaturely arrogance. Paul slays that which every generation of mankind has sought to exalt—something that,

⁸ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 507). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

given the proper context, we do and should admire and even cultivate—the human will and its attending efforts.

So then *it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy (Romans 9:16).*

To Will, To Run

There is nothing unbiblical or ungodly about having a “**will**” *thelontos*. We are called to follow through with an appropriate will or desire. Paul viewed it as a test of genuine love (in the giving for the relief of the saints) when he wrote to the church in Corinth:

So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring (*thelein*) it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have (2 Corinthians 8:11).

We are both to “**will**” and to “**run**” *trechontos*. There is nothing virtuous about being devoid of the desire for excellence or being a slacker in the pursuit of it. We are to “**hunger and thirst for righteousness**” (Matthew 5:6). In all things we should will and seek to do well. “**Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might**” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). In terms of his ministerial pursuits, Paul wrote:

Do you not know that those who run (*trecho*) in a race all run (*trecho*), but one receives the prize? Run (*trecho*) in such a way that you may obtain it (1 Corinthians 9:24).

But it is not within the nature of man to exercise his will in such a way as to place faith in God or to desire to obey God. And it certainly is beyond the capacity of our energy to follow through even if the desire were there. This is true even for a person who, by the grace of God, has been granted faith.

I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good (Romans 7:21).

But for the unregenerate (unsaved) person, there is neither the willing nor the running.

As it is written: “*There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God (Romans 3:10, 11).*”

This is not some isolated, misunderstood verse.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12, 13).

Jesus Himself taught as much:

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws (*helkyse*) him; and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:44).

And He said, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (John 6:55).

But, of course, some *would* come to Christ. Why? How?

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out (John 6:37).

We see the clear example of Peter:

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:15-17).

What Peter must have felt when he heard these words from Christ—that his testimony was not a matter of mere human calculations but from the good pleasure of the Father’s power and will **“to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:6).**

It affords the Christian certainty of their calling, assurance of their election, greater cause for praise, reverence, admiration for God, humility, diligence (in knowing our course is set by the divine hand) and abundant consolation in realizing that we are not willing or running ourselves into heaven, but rather that our willing and our running are the fruit of divine power.

Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20).

Regarding this doctrine of God’s sovereign election, John Calvin wrote:

May there flourish, therefore, sufficient greatness of soul in the Church of God to prevent its godly teachers from being ashamed of the simple profession of true doctrine, however hated it may be, and to refute whatever reproaches the ungodly pour forth.⁹

The godhood of God is controversial. People don’t want to talk about it. People don’t want to hear it. But this is nothing new. Jesus was confronted with a similar disposition:

And He said, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.” From that *time* many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more (John 6:65, 66).

May God grant us the spiritual insight to appreciate the beauty, grace, power and comfort found in the acknowledgment of

⁹ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

His invisible, yet powerful hand as we continue this teaching in our next meeting.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What were some of the biggest interruptions of your life? What adjustment did you have to make?
2. In what ways has Jesus interrupted history? How was He an interruption to the covenant people, Israel?
3. What is the objection the Apostle Paul anticipates? Who would have that objection? Who would not?
4. In what setting did God tell Moses He would have mercy on whomever He would have mercy and compassion and whomever He would have compassion? What would have been the “just” move on God’s part?
5. How does a teaching like this interrupt our lives?
6. Is it bad to will and to run? What are the limitations of the human will and human effort? Explain.
7. How does the doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation affect you? Why?

Romans 9:14-18

Life Interrupted: Unrighteousness With God? – Part II
February 15, 2015

What shall we say then? *Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.” Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens (Romans 9:14-18).*

Introduction

C. S. Lewis observed:

...when Freud is talking about how to cure neurotics he is speaking as a specialist on his own subject, but when he goes on to talk general philosophy he is speaking as an amateur. It is therefore quite sensible to attend to him with respect in the one case and not in the other—and that is what I do. I am all the readier to do it because I have found that when he is talking off his own subject and on a subject I do know something about (namely, languages) he is very ignorant.¹⁰

We do have a bit of a problem when we conclude that because someone is a good singer, actor or soccer player that it must follow that they have acquired expertise in philosophy, politics and religion. We must be careful that we avoid thinking this way of others or ourselves. Because I have a degree in economics (even if I graduated with honors) does not mean that I know that least bit about nutrition.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 69, 70.

As humans we, as mentioned last time, “**will**” and “**run.**” We should do these things ethically and forcefully. That is to say, we should set our sights on that which is good and pursue that good with all our hearts, soul, mind and strength (Luke 10:27). This “good” of which I speak includes education—being informed. There is nothing inherently ungodly about being a scientist or a philosopher; but there is a field of study—a category of thought—in which, when it gets right down to it, we’re all amateurs.

The sort of thought to which I am referring is the category which includes things infinite, eternal, ultimate and everlasting. This is evident when we seek to build a ladder of human disciplines that we hope will get us high enough to peer over the wall and look into a land which the Apostle identified as “**Paradise,**” containing “**inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter**” (2 Corinthians 12:4).

We are somehow persuaded that if we can get our arms around the “true genesis” of the reality we observe then we can unleash in the minds of men true purpose and ethics. This is why philosophers have, throughout the ages, theorized on the ultimate make-up of creation—earth, wind, fire, water, strings, eggs, atoms—some unidentified source of energy that blew all these things into existence. But there is a sad irony that somehow the higher we think we’re getting the lower we are.

Consider the most beautiful of angels:

How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! *How* you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.’ Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit (Isaiah 14:12-15).

Like Goliath, six cubits (the number of a man) and a span—seeking to reach beyond that number—we seek to be more than a man (1 Samuel 17:4; Revelation 13:18; Genesis 1:31). These pursuits

become our undoing. All this to say there is one God. And it is to God and God alone that the prerogatives of *being God* belong.

The Apostle Paul is not bringing this topic up out of thin air. There is a context to these chapters (which I'll mention briefly). But the simple answer to the problem the Apostle is currently addressing is that there is a God in heaven who makes choices, and He is fully and unquestionably righteous in doing so. **“No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, ‘what have you done’” (Daniel 4:35).** And these choices feel invasive to our flesh—choosing one brother over the other for no apparent cause other than His own good pleasure and purpose.

We think we have much more practical answers and reasons for our pursuits; as if mankind would be fine if the omni-benevolent One would just leave us to our own devices. We take counsel together saying **“Let us break their bonds and cast away their cords from us” (Psalm 2:2)**, without the insight of knowing that we're cutting the only branch that keeps us from plummeting in the abyss. The gem of God's wisdom is put before our eyes and the treasure of His Son proclaimed in our ears, but it is the nature of man to know better than God. It is so difficult to heed the admonition:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, and strength to your bones (Proverbs 3:5-8).

“In all your ways acknowledge Him.” This means I am to willingly, joyfully—with a sense that I am putting my life in the hands of One infinitely more qualified to guide me—defer to the counsel of the Lord in **“all”** my ways. This certainly includes ethics, but it is not merely ethics. One is hard-pressed to find a teaching about the character and nature of God which requires the dismissing (not of rational thought) of our **“own understanding”** than the doctrine contained in the passage which lies before us.

Review

As I said, the Apostle did not bring up this topic out of thin air—as if he mischievously concluded that the church needed a good dose of unnecessary controversy to keep her sharp. The current edification he was seeking to bestow the church was that all the promises of God’s covenant of grace are found in Christ. The church had descended to institutionalized Babel building when, **“in the fullness of time...God sent forth His Son” (Galatians 4:4)**. The incarnation of Christ became the magnificent interruption to the Jews and to the world in general. This did not comport with the religious plans of the covenantal community so there was confusion, perhaps more of a grumbling attended by accusations—the very righteousness of God was in question.

That God would be accused of unrighteousness is only anticipated by Paul if he were teaching exactly what it looks like he was teaching—that it is God who, in the final analysis, decrees whatsoever comes to pass—even the free choices of men.

In our last meeting we concluded that, in light of man’s rebellion, we should not question God’s choices, but rather rejoice in His mercy and compassion instead of foolishly demanding justice. Paul thoroughly and systematically sweeps aside the notion that man can find favor with God through his own will or effort. Schreiner appropriately observes:

God’s righteousness is upheld because he manifests it by revealing his glory both in saving and in judging.¹¹

It is remarkable how an enhanced appreciation for the sovereignty of God brings the remainder of the Scripture into sharper focus and provides the resolution to our manifold difficulties. Having opened his Bible, Paul instructed his readers on what they seemed to have missed, that it was never by man’s effort that peace with God would come, but by promise and its attending faith. It was Isaac over Ishmael even though Ishmael was the firstborn. It was Jacob over Esau even though they were twins (Esau being the older twin).

¹¹ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 508). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Seeking to further enhance their appreciation of the sovereignty of God, the Apostle will now will teach that the sovereign choices of God extend beyond the covenant people—even to the very pagan leaders who would oppress them!

For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, “*For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth*” (Romans 9:17).

The Scripture Says

Almost as a side issue, it is worth noting how the Apostle so elevates the word of God. In verse 15 he had indicated that God had spoken to Moses. Here he writes that **“the Scripture says to Pharaoh”** and then proceeds to quote what God would have Moses say to Pharaoh on His behalf in Exodus 9:16. What conclusion can we draw other than acknowledging that God’s word is an extension of Himself!

It is so unlike the word of men—even wise men—who may not actually express in their words what is in their minds or hearts, not to mention the limited capacity of the human mind and heart. It is for this reason that Jesus would say, **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35).**

Raising Up Pharaoh

How shocking it must have been for Pharaoh (probably a more powerful leader than any person on earth today) to hear from Moses God’s declaration of why he had reached such an illustrious post: **“For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.”**

Truly,

The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble (Proverbs 16:4).

Just a few verses later there is another familiar verse that we often understand, and rightly so, as referring to our own actions or the plans of Christians. But it can just as easily be applied to Pharaoh:

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps (Proverbs 16:9).

Perhaps it is most easily summed up later in Proverbs:

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand (Proverbs 19:21).

I am guessing there were many Israelites during the four hundred years of slavery who took comfort—perhaps their only comfort—in the knowledge that their God, *the* God, had His purpose while they labored under the oppression of Egypt. I think of our own political process in a land of progressive apostasy.

When propositions, elections, judicial pronouncements seem to fly in the face of the wisdom and counsel of God, many of us experience dread—the Weltschmerz of having to pessimistically accept our portion in life. We hear the words “The people have spoken” from the lips of the candidates and pundits. But from a deeper perspective, it is God who has spoken.

In a primary and ultimate sense, it is God who makes kings and laws. Those kings and laws can be a blessing or they can be a curse, but the Christian man finds his solace in knowing there is a Supreme Governor of events who declares the beginning from the end—whose counsel shall stand.

...remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’ (Isaiah 46:9b 10).

In a certain sense, to curse the results of the election is to curse the providence of God. Is this an encouragement to call good evil or

evil good? Far from it! Does it mean those who believe in a sovereign God should be passive in the affairs of this world? Certainly not! We should pursue our convictions, whether they be ecclesiastical, familial or political, with zeal and vigor.

But what we learn from portions of Scripture like this is that we can rest assured that the world is not left to slapdash, uncertain promiscuities—as Einstein said, “God would not play dice with the universe.” God has given us just what we need—or just what we deserve—depending on how you want to view it.

During the time of Paul’s writing, the followers of Jesus were facing deadly and torturous religious and political persecution. There were many Christians still alive who had been with Christ (1 Corinthians 15:6), who had no doubt heard Jesus say “peace be with you.” When the faithful are invited by God to peace, it’s not a ‘grin and bear it’ peace. It’s a peace recognizing the invisible hand of a good God behind all of men’s decisions—even the evil decisions.¹²

It is a generally accepted proposition among Christians that the chief end or purpose of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. It might be helpful for us to realize that it appears to be the chief end of God to glorify Himself.

Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness (Psalm 115:1)!

God raised up Pharaoh for the expressed purpose of creating a stage on which God would demonstrate His **“power,”** that His name **“may be declared in all the earth.”**

How is this all accomplished? Is God like a double-agent who sabotages the efforts of evil men by secretly pushing the wrong buttons or interrupting their communications or jamming their weapons? I guess He could do that. But Paul’s explanation is much more astonishing.

Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens (Romans 9:18).

¹² Some of these thoughts were taken from column I wrote for the Daily Breeze entitled *Political Tranquility* Published 11/04/2008.

The Heart of the King

Solomon wrote:

The king's heart *is* in the hand of the Lord, *like* the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes (Proverbs 21:1).

I recall in seminary bringing this verse into a discussion with other students who were arguing for a libertarian understanding of free will—essentially, that the will of man functions autonomously from God. Their retort (given in unison, making me draw the conclusion that they had earlier agreed that this was the best way to understand the verse) was that it is the “king’s heart,” implying that it needn’t be applied to the hearts of others. Later, I came upon the words of the Psalmist:

The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man; from where he sits enthroned he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds (Psalm 33:13, 14).

Our flesh enjoys that God “**has mercy.**” We struggle with the fact that God “**hardens.**” So counterintuitive to the flesh is this teaching that specious and untenable objections fly against it with regularity. One common argument is that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first. But it was quite early in God’s marching orders to Moses that God informed Moses that when he would go back to Egypt “**I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go**” (Exodus 4:21).

But even if we were to grant that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first—aren’t we all born with a heart hardened against God? Are we not all conceived in iniquity (Psalm 51:5)? Could not God just as easily softened Pharaoh’s heart? He softened the other Egyptians. He gave the Israelites “**favor**” in their sight and they offered them silver and gold (Exodus 3:21, 22).

He caused them to be pitied by all those who held them captive (Psalm 106:46).

Why didn't he cause Pharaoh to have pity? The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth that the god of this world blinds **“the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4)**. But that would include every one of us, had not the **“God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’”** shine **“in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6)**.

We are not to have a compromised understanding of the sovereignty of God in anything—especially the human heart. The moment we think ourselves above being the vessel in the hand of the potter (Romans 9:21), we will begin to assign to ourselves the attributes of the potter.

This morning, we have just scratched the surface. But perhaps we can begin, a little better, to appreciate the heart of Jesus when in reflection upon His Father's glorious and powerful hardening and softening that **“rejoiced in the Spirit”** and prayed:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will (Luke 10:21).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What must we avoid when it comes to listening to people who are experts in a certain field? Can you think of some examples?
2. In what category or field are all humans amateurs? What is a common pursuit among men in this category and what do they think they will achieve?
3. What happens when man seeks to “cast away their cords from” God?
4. Why is the Apostle Paul writing this? What is the context which brings up this issue? How does a proper understanding of the sovereignty of God bring the Scripture into sharper focus?
5. How is the Word of God synonymous with God Himself?
6. Why did God raise up Pharaoh and how did God accomplish His purposes through Him? How can this be both humbling and comforting to the Christian?
7. What is the chief end of man? What is the chief end of God?
8. What happens when we begin to compromise the sovereignty of God?

Romans 9:19-24

The Potter and the Lump – Part I

You Talkin' to Me?

February 22, 2015

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

What if God, wanting to show *His* wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, *even* us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles (Romans 9:19-24)?¹³

My Vexing Theological Odyssey

Around 1980, after having come to faith and serving in a lay ministerial capacity for several years, I was confronted with the notion of predestination. I was vexed. *How could this be? How could it be that God determines beforehand who would be saved and who would not?* I quickly came to realize I was not the only Christian having difficulty with this doctrine.

Numerous teachers and countless books had been written to counter this “horrible” teaching. I sought to take refuge in their counsel. After all, if God is the one who forcefully and unwaveringly determines the beginning to the end (Isaiah 46:9, 10), what would that say about the value of my evangelism, my prayers, my efforts and my decisions? Would these things become (as one man told me) a mere charade? Is God truly a divine puppet master and we His marionettes—manipulated by strings from above?

My experience as a human being said ‘absolutely not.’ I am a thinking, free and volitional creature. I weigh things out and make

¹³ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Ro 9:19–24). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

decisions; sometimes the decisions require agonizing contemplation and prayer. The very decision to trust and follow Christ was a major milestone in my own heart and mind that I arrived at after almost tortured introspection and deliberation—like choosing a school, career or a spouse. I knew my decision here would change my life. After all, didn't Jesus teach regarding discipleship...

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it (Luke 14:26)?

Counting the cost was part of the decision-making process. I and I alone made the choice to follow Christ in the solitude of my own room.

Is this not the charge given numerous times in Scripture?

...choose this day whom you will serve. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord (Joshua 24:15).

Yet serving the Lord meant submission to His will and wisdom found in His word. And I could not rid myself of this incessant doctrine of predestination. The word was not a mere theological convenience. It was actually in the Bible, in more than one verse (Acts 4:28; Romans 8:29, 30; Ephesians 1:5, 11). And the word “**predestination**” *Proorizo* meant in the Greek exactly what it means in the English “to come to a decision beforehand—to determine ahead of time.” And not only that, other forms of the same concept seemed to appear on every page of the Bible—words like *chosen*, *elect*, *appointed* and so on. Being a Christian meant believing in predestination.

But I quickly learned there were clever ways of getting around the obvious meaning of the notion. There must be “good reasons” why God would predestine, choose, elect and appoint. Perhaps He could see into the future that I would choose Him and therefore He would choose me based upon His foreknowledge of what He knew I would do. Yet a clear teaching of Scripture is that no one left to their own will would choose God. Besides, if God saw that I would choose Him of my own accord, why would He need to choose me?

Another explanation was that God would “choose” or “elect” individuals the way the owner of a football team might choose or draft a player—but of course the player can always decide he does not want to play football at all any longer. Perhaps it was that kind of choosing—a choosing that I could resist. But why did I stop resisting? Why would I say ‘yes’ and my neighbor say ‘no’? Why would I look around and say “I’m going with Joshua”? Was it something within me that was wiser or humbler or more virtuous? It certainly felt like it. But again, the Scriptures were not unclear of how man has no room to boast.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

It’s not merely that we shouldn’t boast; we have no room to boast! Variations of these same clever alternatives were not rare. Some are very old and creative. One attempt, for example, to preserve human freedom was called Molinism, or Middle Knowledge. In short, God doesn’t determine a person’s destiny by effectively changing their heart by His Spirit through the gospel, but He knows what a free moral agent will do given the proper set of circumstances. In short, God knows that ‘a’ given the set of circumstances ‘b’ will freely choose ‘c’ (‘c’ being the gospel).

So if God wanted to save my soul, He knew me well enough to know that if He could have certain events and people come into my life at a certain junction sharing a certain message that I would freely choose to follow Christ. At first blush, this is satisfying. That is, until you ask who made ‘a’ in such a way that given ‘b’ he could choose ‘c’? And why didn’t He make everybody that way? It became a brand of soteriology (the study of salvation) that Chris Neiswonger calls “cosmic entrapment.” It doesn’t answer the problem, it just pushes it back a level.

On and on the battle went. It was no easy time for my soul. But it was the first verse in the passage we read this morning that became the tipping point—because this was very much the nagging question in my heart. And I have found that almost every discussion

with others who are vexed by this unsearchable phenomenon leads to the same question.

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will” (Romans 9:19)?

Finding Fault?

That is precisely what I was asking. If God is the one setting the table, how can He complain that the forks and knives and glasses are ill-placed—or even further, that the very nature of the settings (settings that He created) are foul and corrupt and worthy to be damned?

If the alternative doctrines (the ones involving foresight and absolute freedom or middle knowledge) were true, would not Paul anticipate a different question? Would not his question be something along the lines of: “You will say to me then, ‘How is it all of grace if it is left to the human will?’” or some other such objection.

The student of God’s word would be irked by something entirely different. We would be left with the unsearchable question of “How am I saved by grace when the difference between heaven and hell is found ultimately in me—my will, my heart, my calculations, my wisdom in making a better choice than my neighbor?” But that is not the question Paul anticipates his readers will ask.

This question or objection necessarily presupposes that Paul has been teaching exactly what it appears that he has been teaching—that before we are born, before we have done good or evil, **“God’s purpose of election might stand, not because of works but because of him who calls,”** meaning the destiny of man is determined by God (Romans 9:11, 12). It is God who has mercy and it is God who hardens (Romans 9:18). There are no other options that would force us to ask the question that the Apostle assumes we will ask.

How does the Apostle respond to such a question? There appears to be a threefold response: First, he will address an attitude. Secondly, he will build on why there should be that attitude based upon the nature of the relationship. Finally, he will offer at least one potential reason as to why God would decree such things.

But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this” (Romans 9:20)?

Quick to Hear

Let’s talk a bit about the attitude. It is one thing to have a legitimate question that you find puzzling. It is quite another thing to be obstinate. Questions sometimes are just a matter of investigation and organizing our thoughts. But other times, questions carry a bravado that is not a question at all but rather a preamble to my next protest.

We have all been on one side or the other of this conversation (if it can even be called a conversation—more like two people taking turns talking without listening). I’ve walked away from conversations realizing that I had not listened at all. I have noticed it in others, when it appears they just didn’t hear a word I said. James writes,

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger (James 1:19).

The rule found in this simple verse can solve so many problems. What does it mean to be “**quick to hear**”? It means to be attentive, willing and understanding in the dialogue, to genuinely want to know what the person is saying. Sometimes, even if you never get to your side of the argument, helping a person fully express what they want to say is sufficient for them to realize there might be a flaw in their thinking. Or, just maybe, when they are fully heard, you will realize there was a component to the issue that you were missing. How much deeper does this apply when it is God who speaks!

Replying Against God

The language the Apostle uses here clearly gives the impression that he is dealing with an attitude problem. “**O man, who are you to reply against God?**” It could be translated “**O man, on the contrary (*menouge*), who are you to answer back (*antapokrinomai*) to God?**” Like when a parent tells a child, “Don’t

talk back!” Why does Paul assume an attitude problem? Sometimes questions are just questions.

It might be helpful for us to realize that oftentimes what we might view as the reasonable and logical conclusion regarding an issue has been influenced by a disposition tainted by sin. What was it in me that found it so difficult to acknowledge the unsearchable sovereign election of God but readily embrace the (I would argue) unbiblical doctrine of human autonomy? It wasn’t merely that my mind couldn’t grasp it (predestination); it was that my flesh didn’t like it. I felt as if I was being robbed of a precious human attribute—like William Wallace on the executioner’s table yelling “freedom.” I was being called to give up something that I wanted to keep.

So there is contained in Paul’s answer a ‘*do you have any idea who you’re talking to?*’ exhortation. We marvel at the notion of the Lord speaking to Moses “**as a man speaks to his friend**” (**Exodus 33:11**). But we must be careful that we avoid interacting with God as if He were a contemporary—an equal to be argued with.

I recently visited a local coffee house where they have poetry readings. A young lady, prior to offering her poem, asked if there were any “super religious” people in the establishment. I’m not sure if super religious is the right term, but I raised my hand (don’t think she saw me). Her poem contained objections to the notion of hell—especially as it related to human behavior. She then, somewhat graphically, testified of giving into her own passions and how unreasonable it would be for God to create her with these strong desires and then call the desires sinful. I think she genuinely thought she had a great point.

I had to leave in a hurry, but a large part of me wanted to sit down with her and her friends and explain that there is nothing wrong with the desires given the proper context—in this case, the context of marriage. Certainly it shouldn’t be too difficult for she herself to conclude that there are certain human passions which must be checked. That a person has a strong desire to engage in a certain behavior is certainly no argument against the existence or righteousness of God. If her boyfriend began flirting with another girl, one wonders if she would buy the argument “How could it be wrong if I really want to do it?”

I felt sorrow for her—as if I saw a future for her full of pain, frustration and heartache followed by judgment. Perhaps things will

change. But her thinking on this matter wasn't clear. Yet she had no hesitation heralding her disdain for God in a very public way. Any clear thinking person could highlight the flaws in her thinking. I mention her because, in certainly a less blasphemous way, the natural man (and even the Christian man) displays the same self-confidence—the same self-assurance that he has found a flaw in God's thinking when it comes to the issue of predestination. We forget we're not merely arguing with a wise person—we are arguing with wisdom itself, with goodness, with logic, with righteousness.

A Little Talk with God

What would this conversation actually look like if God noticed us taking umbrage with His divine decrees? We have the bravado of an anonymous social media character sitting at his computer flexing his muscles of indignation in a thread where no one can see or touch him.

We are like the scoffers who mutter, **“Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:2)**. But there will be a conversation one day. And it might be the height of human folly to think that we will fare well in that conversation.

But how can a man be in the right before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times (Job 2:2, 3).

I can think of one very long conversation recorded for our benefit in Scripture (extending from Job 38-41). A couple of highlights when the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said:

Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you set their dominion over the earth (Job 38:33)?

This answer that God gives contains a bit of His resumé and goes on for a while. And interspersed, we begin to observe the proper and inevitable disposition of one who truly has an audience with the Almighty:

Moreover the Lord answered Job, and said: “Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct *Him*? He who rebukes God, let him answer it.” Then Job answered the Lord and said: “Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth” (Job 40:1-3).

God continues:

Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me: “Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified” (Job 40:7, 8)?

In our next meeting, we will further examine the Apostle’s answer to the objection—the nature of the relationship and one potential reason for God’s holy decrees in salvation and damnation. But lest we be tempted to have a cavalier attitude in our interactions with God, let us pray we can adopt a Job-like heart with a God who has condescended to be mindful of man and care for man (Psalm 8:4).

Then Job answered the Lord and said: “I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of *Yours* can be withheld from You. *You asked*, ‘Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; *You said*, ‘I will question you, and you shall answer Me.’ “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:1-6).

If you’re a member of this church, you made a vow when you stood before the congregation—a confession extracted from the passage we just read. To this question, you answered in the affirmative:

(3) Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, that you repent of your sin, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?

Abhorrence—the word means to shudder or bristle, to be horrified. It was the experience of Isaiah when confronted with the holiness of God. It is the reasonable response of anyone whose eyes have been opened to their own sin in light of the righteousness of God. Wisdom is found in God alone and salvation is found in Christ alone. Let us set our minds there as we go to the Lord's Table this morning.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you been vexed by the doctrine of predestination? What do you find difficult about it?
2. What are some ways people seek to get around or avoid the doctrine of predestination? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these alternatives?
3. How does the question the Apostle Paul assumes people will ask give credence to the doctrine of predestination?
4. What does it mean to be *quick to hear*?
5. Why does the Apostle assume there is an attitude problem connected with the question of replying against God? In what ways can sin affect our thinking?
6. How do you suppose a conversation with God might go? Where would it lead in terms of our own hearts?

Romans 9:19-24

The Potter and the Lump – Part II

Why Hast Thou Made Me Thus?

March 1, 2015

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

What if God, wanting to show *His* wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, *even* us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles (Romans 9:19-24)?¹⁴

Review

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will” (Romans 9:19)?

As we discussed last time, there is only one teaching that would presuppose these questions; namely, that God is the ultimate source—the first cause—when it comes to making choices regarding human destiny. The Apostle then begins to give a threefold answer to this question. The first part addressed an anticipated attitude.

But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God (Romans 9:20a)?

We considered how the Lord spoke to Moses “**as a man speaks to his friend**” (Exodus 33:11). But we must be careful that we avoid interacting with God as if He were a contemporary—an equal to be argued with.

¹⁴ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Ro 9:19–24). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

But how can a man be in the right before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times (Job 2:2, 3).

Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you set their dominion over the earth (Job 38:33)?

This demonstrates the proper and inevitable disposition of one who truly has an audience with the Almighty:

Moreover the Lord answered Job, and said: “Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct *Him*? He who rebukes God, let him answer it.” Then Job answered the Lord and said: “Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth” (Job 40:1-3).

This morning we will apply our hearts to grasping the nature of the relationship, at its very basic level; that is to say, not as God our Father or God our Savior or Counselor, etc.—but as God *our Maker*. Then next time we will complete this section with a brief analysis of one potential reason why God would decree such things.

Will the thing formed say to him who formed *it*, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor (Romans 9:20b, 21)?

The Nature of the Relationship: We’re Not Robots!

I mentioned last time that I had found difficulty in my own theological odyssey with the concept of God finding fault if His will is irresistible. I then explained how, so often, that is where the discussion ends up—it is the first and natural objection. But it is a New York second until another objection rapidly follows. It is the “we’re not robots” objection. That is a protest with which I wholeheartedly agree. Men are not robots—no, not even really awesome robots!

Movies provide fantasies about men building robots with a level of artificial intelligence that somehow transitions into a soul (I believe there is yet another movie along those lines out in theaters right now). But a robot (no matter how cute and endearing their personality) is not made in the image of man as man is made in the image of God. And this is yet another place where we demonstrate our low view of God—as if His creative power were not merely analogous to ours but equal to ours!

The thinking goes something like this:

- Men make robots which do exactly what they're programmed to do. They are merely a complex piece of machinery under the power of a remote control in the hand of their maker. Therefore, they have no will and they cannot be held responsible for their actions.
- God makes men who do exactly what He decrees them to do. They are merely a complex piece of organic machinery under the power of a providence controlled by God. Therefore, they have no will and they cannot be held responsible for their actions.

Creativity may be one of the communicable attributes (those attributes of God that men also have), but we err greatly when we reduce or put limitations on God's creative power by saying 'if this is the way it works for us, this must be the way it works for God.'

Man is not a robot. There is no genuine sense in which we can say a robot is made in our image as we are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26). Man cannot say of a robot that he **“breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7)**. Of what robot can it be said that man created it with a reasonable and immortal soul (Genesis 2:7)? It is said of man that when he dies his **“spirit returns to the God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7)**. Can that be said of a robot? In God's incomparable, creative genius He endued man with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness (Ephesians 4:24). Can that be said of a robot?

Man is **“fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14)**. He is the central figure in the creation account; as if the waters, the

land, the plants, the animals, the sun, the moon and the stars were a mere afterthought or addendum.

When God observed the fall and how it affected all of creation, He viewed it the way a father might view a burning house. It was not the house, nor the objects in the house that would become the focus of His rescue efforts—no, it would be His child that needed to be rescued. Not even the angels:

**For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps
the offspring of Abraham (Hebrews 2:16).**

No, man is not a robot. But it must be said that in the categories under our current study—the category of God’s eternal decrees (the choices He ordains) and the category of God’s providence (His upholding, directing, disposing, and governing of all creatures, actions and things)—man is not compared to anything as complex or impressive as a robot.

A Lump of Clay

In this category we are compared to a “**lump**” *phyrama* of “**clay**” *pelos* or mud. And there is nothing fancy about this mud. It is the same word used in the account of Jesus spitting on the ground and making mud with His saliva.

It is precisely here (perhaps more than any other issue) that we must yield to the Creator/creature distinction. God informs us that it is not a healthy curiosity when the creature begins to arraign the Master Architect of all creation for His choices. We are creatures who should enjoy and properly govern that which God has put under our care—the sheep and oxen and beasts and birds and fish (Psalm 8:7, 8). It is when we forget this, and seek a higher station, that things go south. Failure to yield to the godhood of God has produced untold numbers of the deaths of men in this life and the myriad murder of souls in the next.

We are on the great field of creation and we look around it and marvel. We should appreciate its beauty and seek to make proper, godly decisions. And God reveals Himself through the things that He made (Romans 1:20; Psalm 19:1). Even further, and more specifically, He reveals Himself through His word (Psalm 19:7, 8).

So we are called not merely to look horizontally at the creation but look unto Jesus (Hebrews 12:2).

But when that little piece of hell—that unwanted guest which still resides in our fallen natures—begins to rear its ugly head and say **“I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High,”** I demand to hear things **“that cannot be told, which man may not utter,”** it is that thinking which brings the soul to Sheol (death) and the **“far reaches of the pit” (Isaiah 14:14, 15; 2 Corinthians 12:4).**

Curiosity can be a good thing or a bad thing. To be intrigued by the creation in such a way as to increase our appreciation of it or to seek to know how things work so that we may figure out a way for them to work better is good. But when curiosity leads people to fish for gossip, it is bad. When God says this is beyond you, it is a good thing to yield—for the sake of what happens in this life and the next. Calvin put it this way:

Since thou art man, thou ownest thyself to be dust and ashes; why then doest thou contend with the Lord about that which thou art not able to understand?¹⁵

I think it is accurately said in Job:

Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty (Job 11:7)?

Deuteronomy 29 ends with a very familiar verse which informs us that the secret things belong to the Lord. The context of that verse is Moses speaking with the Israelites who he had led for forty years, yet they remained in rebellion and disfavor with God. Why? Certainly, in a secondary, and very real, sense it was due to their stubborn and stiff-necked hearts. But early in the chapter Moses expresses the primary cause:

Yet the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day (Deuteronomy 29:4).

¹⁵ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 9:20). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

It is in this great and unsearchable and glorious doctrine that we are told that which we find so difficult to accept—though it comes from an infinitely wise and benevolent God:

The secret *things* belong to the Lord our God, but those *things* which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that *we* may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

It is simply beyond the “lump” to ask or know such heavenly things.

That Which is Revealed

But Deuteronomy 29:29 should not be read as if God cannot be understood at all. There are **“those things which are revealed (that) belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”** Instead of seeking to peer into the secret things—things beyond the creature—perhaps we should set our hearts upon that which has been revealed.

Years ago, I was invited to debate this subject with a friend at another church. Afterward, we fielded questions. One gentleman stood up and asked me, “How do I know if I’m chosen—if I’m elect of God?” He asked the question (it is possible I may be wrong here) as if there were no answer to the question, as if the assurance of being chosen of God was as unsearchable as the doctrine itself. Either way, it is a good question.

In his wonderful pastoral epistle to Timothy, Paul once again illustrates his point by using the metaphor of vessels of honor and dishonor.

**But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal:
“The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Timothy 2:19a).**

Clearly, the Lord knows those who are His. But how do *we* know? Paul continues:

...and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.” Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:19b-26).

Time doesn’t allow a detailed analysis of all the attributes in this passage. Simply put, you know you are a vessel of honor if you know Christ as your Master and seek to make yourself useful to **“the master of the house, ready for good work.”**

But it must be said, especially as we prepare our hearts for the Lord’s Table, that it is not by our good work(s) or usefulness that we manufacture ourselves as vessels of honor. It might be said that **“by nature”** we were all vessels of **“wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2:3)**. The means by which we can have great assurance that we are vessels of honor is not the means by which one is made a vessel of honor.

I may look at my birth certificate, consider the language I speak and the land where I live, and have great assurance that I am an American. But none of those things make me an American. I must, for the sake of the metaphor, be born in America—an event I contributed very little (really nothing) to. So the vessel of honor must be reborn as a child of the kingdom. And similar to my first birth, my second birth was something to which I contributed nothing but pain.

Becoming a vessel is honor is a transformation that came with a price that was paid by someone else, as though the Potter poured His very blood into that lump. It might be said that we were all vessels of wrath (at least in a certain sense)...

...like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4, 5).

Let that be the meditation of our hearts as we go to the Lord's Table this morning.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What does the Apostle's question in Romans 9:19 necessarily presuppose?
2. What disposition should we adapt in our interactions with God?
3. Why does the doctrine of election cause some to say it makes men robots? What is deficient about that comparison?
4. When it comes to the issues of God's eternal decrees and God's providence, what is man compared to?
5. When is curiosity good? When is it not good? Discuss curiosity as it relates to election.
6. How do you know if you're elect of God—a vessel of honor?
7. What is the price that has been paid to make a person a vessel of honor?

Romans 9:25-29

The Remnant Will Be Saved

March 29, 2015

As He says also in Hosea: “I will call them My people, who were not My people, and her beloved, who was not beloved.” “And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ there they shall be called sons of the living God.” Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved. For He will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness, because the Lord will make a short work upon the earth.” And as Isaiah said before: “Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been made like Gomorrah” (Romans 9:25-29).

Introduction

Perhaps you’re acquainted with an article¹⁶ that came out recently. It was written by an ordained Presbyterian minister (PCUSA) and highlighted the current distinctions he has with most Presbyterians. Some of these beliefs include: religion being a human construct; most of what we know about Jesus is legend; God is a symbol of myth-making and not credible as a supernatural being or force; the Bible is a human product; there is no afterlife; etc. I find it incredible that all these views are held by a currently ordained Presbyterian minister! How in the world does it come to this?

As He says also in Hosea: “I will call them My people, who were not My people, and her beloved, who was not beloved.” “And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ there they shall be called sons of the living God.” (Romans 9:25, 26).

¹⁶ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2015/03/17/im-a-presbyterian-minister-who-doesnt-believe-in-god-2/>

Unlikely Candidates

The Apostle Paul explains here how the inclusion of the gentiles as the people of God was not a new idea. The attentive reader of the Old Testament would have recognized God's ultimate plan to save the world, not just Israel. The references we see from Hosea (a combination of Hosea 1:10; 2:23, 25), though Paul uses them here in reference to the gentiles, were originally aimed at the Jew, the ten tribes, because they had sunk to the level of heathen.¹⁷ Be that as it may, it always seems to be the unlikely candidates who find peace with God.

Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you (Matthew 21:31).

Let us not, in our study, lose the affection in these pronouncements. God's people—beloved of God—sons of the living God—aimed at the most unworthy of recipients. Paul now goes on to quote Isaiah (Isaiah 10:22, 23; 28:22) who unveils the other side of the plan.

Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel: “*Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved*” (Romans 9:27).

Only a Remnant

Those who were not God's people would be God's people, and of those who thought themselves to be God's people only a remnant would be saved. The vast majority of the covenant people of God (Israel) would reject that which was the necessary element for the covenant to be beneficial to them. It was in the temple (not the marketplace) and to religious people that Jesus taught:

¹⁷ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Vol. 2, p. 246). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

**You know me, and you know where I come from.
But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent
me is true, and him you do not know (John 7:28).**

It is a sad irony that many of the very people who viewed themselves as owning a superior place in God's economy were the "vessels of wrath" designed to show more brightly the "riches of His glory" on the unlikely "vessels of mercy" (Romans 9:22, 23).

***"For He will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness,
because the Lord will make a short work upon the earth" (Romans
9:28).***

A Faithful Judgment

This is a difficult verse. I take it to mean that God will demonstrate His faithfulness—His righteousness—in His judgment upon Israel (the apex of which was the destruction of the temple: Matthew 24:1, 2) and His establishing of His New Covenant Church, which the very gates of Hades will not prevail against (Matthew 16:18).

**Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be
taken away from you and given to a people
producing its fruits (Matthew 21:43).**

***And as Isaiah said before: "Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left us
a seed, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been
made like Gomorrah" (Romans 9:29).***

An Unworthy People

Again, Paul, quoting Isaiah 1:9, brings to ruin the notion that the covenant people of God can take comfort in their status by mere inclusion in an ethnic group or even a religious community. Had it not been for the *seed*—the small remnant of those who kept faith—that the community would have had the same fate as Sodom and Gomorrah.

Hopefully we see the point of the passage. In including the gentiles and excluding the Israelite who found no place in the religious life for Jesus, God remains faithful and just to His promises. What does this mean to you and to me as members of the New Covenant community—the administration of which is through the church and not Israel? What does this mean to us? Let us go back to the Presbyterian minister who doesn't believe in God.

The Church

Having not been raised in the church, I recall having the typical culturally-generated suspicion regarding the sincerity of church goers. I didn't think they were all fakes and phonies, but I certainly didn't think they were legitimate simply because they went to church. My friend, who was the pastor's son, was fond of saying that going to church no more makes you a Christian than sleeping in the garage makes you a car. Little doubt, I was courting a view of the value of the church that was too low.

At the same time, having come to faith and associating myself with the church, I had little tolerance for those who believed and yet behaved in a manner inconsistent with their Christian profession. If I erred, it was generally on the side of being overly critical. The words of Christ in Matthew were very thematic for me:

You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:7-9).

It's a funny little tightrope—balancing somewhere between not breaking the “**bruised reed**” or snuffing out the “**smoldering wick**” (Matthew 12:20a) and allowing Simon the magician to continue in the church unchecked, whose “**heart is (was) not right before God**” (Acts 8:21).

Goodness and Severity

We sit here in the bosom of Christ's church—His covenant people—where we find comfort, as Jesus taught: **“rest for our souls” (Matthew 11:28)**. Like a womb, the church should be safe, but, like a womb, it has become one of the most dangerous locations. Later in Romans we will be taught to **“look” or “note” or “consider”** both the **“goodness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22)**.

It is woven into the folly of the nature of man to despise the wisdom and instruction of God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:7).

And, sadly, this folly is found even within the church. When the church decides they know better than God, when they self-consciously contradict the teaching of Scripture or neglect the word of God as the source of their knowledge of faith and practice, the assurance they have of peace with God may be a hellish delusion.

Westminster Confession, Chapter 18, paragraph 1 teaches:

Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God, and estate of salvation (Job 8:13–14, Micah 3:11, Deut. 29:19, John 8:41) (which hope of theirs shall perish): (Matt. 7:22–23) yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, (1 John 2:3, 1 John 3:14,18–19,21,24, 1 John 5:13) and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed (Rom. 5:2, 5).

The Apostle Paul has been giving his treatise on the faithfulness of God—His word had not **“failed” (Romans 9:6)**. God is a promise-making, promise-keeping God.

The Cataclysmic Error

And the devastating problem—the cataclysmic error—was that the Israelite took comfort by mere inclusion in a community; a community which slowly, yet consistently, drifted into a “**den of thieves**” (Matthew 21:13) whose clergy was a “**brood of vipers**” (Matthew 23:33) and whose disciples were “**sons of hell**” (Matthew 23:13).

It is undeniable that God is a promise-making, promise-keeping God. The question they quit asking was, “How do I know that I am the object of God’s promise?” This is no mere history lesson about the transition from the Old Covenant administration to the New Covenant administration. Paul will later give the warning that the same thing that happened to Israel—having been cut off due to faithlessness—can happen to the church:

For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in *His* goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off (Romans 11:21, 22).

There may be no greater indicator of a wayward church (both in leadership and membership) than its inappropriate administration and participation in the Lord’s Supper. I think our secondary standards are very biblical when they speak of the Lord’s Supper as...

...a means of grace by which God feeds us with the crucified, resurrected, exalted Christ. He does so by his Holy Spirit and through faith... In this sacrament, God confirms that he is faithful and true to fulfill the promises of his covenant, and he calls us to deeper gratitude for our salvation, to renewed consecration, and to more faithful obedience... As we come to the Lord's Table, we humbly resolve to deny ourselves, to crucify the sin that is within us, to resist the devil, and to follow Christ as becomes those who bear his name.

This should not be confused with the notion that sinful man can morally or spiritually elevate himself to a status of worthiness to take and eat. The explanation continues:

We dare not come to the Lord's Table as if we were worthy and righteous in ourselves. We come in a worthy manner if we recognize that we are unworthy sinners who need our Savior, if we consciously discern his body given for our sins, if we hunger and thirst after Christ, giving thanks for his grace, trusting in his merits, feeding on him by faith, renewing our covenant with him and his people.

Let us not think ourselves immune to being “cut off.” Let us ever persevere in faith and obedience—collectively and individually—trusting in His blood alone, and ever seeking to walk in faithful obedience.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How do you think a church loses its faithfulness?
2. Was the inclusion of the gentiles in God's promises a new plan? Why does it always seem that God chooses unlikely candidates?
3. Were all Israelites saved in the Old Covenant? Explain.
4. Who is the "seed" in verse 29? What would have happened if there had been no seed?
5. Does going to church make you a Christian? Explain.
6. What is assurance? What is a "hellish delusion" when it comes to assurance?
7. God is a promise-making, promise-keeping God. What is the cataclysmic error often made in the church?
8. How can the Lord's Supper be an indicator of a wayward church?

Romans 9:30-33

The Stumbling Stone

April 12, 2015

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because *they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame”* (Romans 9:30-33).

Introduction

Some families ventured to downtown Los Angeles this past week to see an exhibit of the Dead Sea Scrolls. There was also a 3D movie at the IMAX entitled *Jerusalem*. It was very well made and portrayed the history of Jerusalem through the eyes of three teenage girls: one Jewish, one Muslim and one Christian.

As one would expect, the movie sought to find a unifying element in the world’s three major religions. The three young girls were all delightful and articulate. They had strong family bonds. They all had their own story of the significance of Jerusalem in their history, culture and religion. They all lived very close to each other and yet knew very little about each other. The movie ended with their hopes of resolving the lack of knowledge they had of their neighbors.

I, for one, think an open dialogue between the cultures and their religious convictions would be strikingly profitable. I am a strong believer that the truth will prevail—it’s like a **“fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces” (Jeremiah 23:29)**. Those who hold to truth should not be too concerned with silencing those with whom they disagree. The danger lies when we find ourselves silenced. Whatever our post—pastor, politician or prisoner—we should announce the truth. It was precisely here that the apostles would not yield—even to the rulers and elders (Acts 4:5).

But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19, 20).

The Door to God?

One thing I found interesting in the movie was how Jerusalem was referred to as a “door to God.” And this was followed by highlighting the various religious practices of the three major religions—the Western Wall for the Jews, the Dome of the Rock for the Muslims and the Via Dolorosa (*Way of Grief*—the path Jesus carried His cross) for the Christians.

They would then show festivals and practices that are deeply rooted in their various religions and the history behind them. It was all very interesting, but I, as a Christian, found very little resonance with any of what I watched—even the Christian portions. I couldn’t help but think of Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4.

When the conversation became overly personal and, perhaps, uncomfortable (Jesus speaking to her of immoral lifestyle and how she brought up how the Samaritans would worship on Mt. Gerizim while the Jews will worship in Jerusalem), Jesus summarily dismisses the notion that there is any inherent significance to Jerusalem. *It is not about the mountain!* Jesus continues:

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23, 24).

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith (Romans 9:30).

Not Pursuing, Yet Receiving

“What shall we say then?” The Apostle will give the conclusion of what he has been presenting for the entire chapter. That a religious community has found itself outside the pale of God’s covenant promises is no indictment against God or His word—His word has not failed (Romans 9:6). It is by God’s divine decree—His choice—and His grace, love and power that sinners find themselves in His favor. It is not by blood, ethnicity, community, religious practice or human ethics. And he will make this point by (almost) overstating the issue.

That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith (Romans 9:30b).

No Pursuit

Certainly the gentiles (those outside the covenant community of the Old Testament—the non-religious people), in some secondary sense, pursued righteousness (they weren’t led into church at gunpoint). But Paul prefers to highlight the primary cause. It was both Jew and gentile (representing all humanity) who fell into the category Paul mentioned much earlier in Romans 3:11—that **“there is none who seeks after God.”**

Paul is holding to his guns of predestination. Any pursuit of righteousness found in the gentiles—in any of us—is the result of God’s grace, not the purchaser of it. Those who truly seek after God are those whom God has first sought after.

The Righteousness of Faith

By their natures they would not have pursued righteousness, but, according to the Apostle, they attained the very righteousness they weren’t even interested in pursuing—**“the righteousness of faith.”** What did this look like? We could go back to the Samaritan woman. She did not go to the well that day pursuing righteousness, but she did leave...**her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, “Come see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ...? And many of the**

Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me all that I *ever* did” (John 4:28, 39).

The Good News of the gospel was, is and ever will be that man is justified (and here I would say ‘reckoned as righteous’) by grace alone through faith alone. Some will argue against that because we don’t see those terms or phrases specifically used in Scripture. But we do see, over and over, the Apostle’s letters (and virtually all of Scripture) eliminate anything that can be added to faith which would serve to justify sinners.

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified (Galatians 2:15, 16).

Paul now turns from the justified gentiles to the religious but unjustified Israelite.

...but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because *they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law* (Romans 9:31, 32a).

Pursuit without Faith

There may never have been a people with a more taxonomic approach to religion. They had, if you will, a very scientific classification of ethics and rituals—many of them derived from Scripture, some not. We should not argue that there is something inherently evil about ethics and rituals. We all have them. Two quick points:

First, our ethics and religious practice should be derived from Scripture—either explicitly or by necessary consequence or inference. Secondly, and more importantly, our ethics and religious practice should all be done in faith. In short, we do not engage in ethics or religion as if it were the means by which we approve ourselves before

God. Our religion should highlight a God-given faith through which we find our approval via the atoning work of Christ on the cross, and that *alone*. Our ethics are done in light of and as a response to that grace.

There is great value to ethics. There is also great value to the proper pursuit of worship. But it can easily be argued that the greatest value of both of these is a crisper and less veiled grasp of our need for the grace of God found in the blood of Christ.

There is an ethical and religious trap that we need to avoid. The moment we think that by our ethics or religion we can bridge the gap or begin to build a ladder between earth and heaven, we have taken the first step away from the Christian faith and our only hope. Every brick we seek to add to our own justification is a nail we seek to take from His hands and feet. And eventually, as we saw with the nation of Israel, the primary reason ethics and religion exists becomes an inconvenience.

For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame” (Romans 9:32b-33).

A Rock of Offense

Paul mentions yet another trap—a “**rock of offense**” *skandalon*—used by hunters with a stick and a box where the animal causes the trap to shut. This stumbling stone, this rock of offense, is Christ Himself. It is no small wonder that people seek to alter what Jesus taught and (even more so) what Jesus did. If you can manage to remove the person and work of Christ from your religion it becomes an empty shell.

No matter how big your budget or building—in spite of your religious pageantry or the magnanimous testimonies of your adherents—thanking God for their successes like the Pharisee who went back to his home without being justified (Luke 18:10-14), if Jesus gets in the way of your religion, rather than being the purpose (the end *telos* of it—Romans 10:4) we become a collective of cups that are clean on the outside but full of greed and self-indulgence (Matthew 23:25), whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear

beautiful but within are full of dead men's bones and uncleanness (Matthew 23:27).

It is so often against the tide, even of the religious community, to say and believe that a person needs to look to Christ—to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2). For those who look to Him will, on that Day of Judgment, not be ashamed. You wonder if Paul, recognizing man's intrinsic desire to religious ceremonialism, was a bit tongue in cheek when he turns the corner of this great epistle in chapter 12—when he begins to tell us how we ought to live in light of all he had previously taught. Ask yourself: *Do you hunger for religious pageantry? Would you have incense and candles—perhaps even an altar?*

Here is Paul's counsel—put yourself on the altar, be a living sacrifice in all you say, do and think, which in light of all that Christ has done for us is our **“reasonable service” (Romans 12:1)**.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Should those who hold the truth seek to silence others? Why or why not? What should those who hold to the truth never do? How do you see this happening in your life?
2. How significant is Jerusalem? How can religious conversations become uncomfortable? How is there value in this?
3. What has been the Apostle Paul's teaching up to verse 30?
4. How did the gentiles attain to righteousness if they didn't pursue it? What is the righteousness of faith?
5. Is it wrong to pursue the law? Is it wrong to seek to be righteous? Is it wrong to be involved in religious ritual? When does it become wrong?
6. How does Jesus become a stumbling block? How have you seen this happen in your culture or in your life?

Romans 10:1

My Heart's Desire and Prayer to God

April 19, 2015

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved (Romans 10:1).

A Critical Situation

Driving down the freeway I saw a panel van to my right swerve off the road. It bounced into the median and started tumbling before coming to a halt on its side. As soon as I could safely come to a stop I pulled over. I employed my limited education in emergency situations looking to stop some bleeding and see if anybody had lost consciousness. By the time I had applied direct pressure on some wounds and determined that no one needed CPR, the paramedics had arrived.

What I did wasn't heroic. I was never in any danger. At most I was mildly inconvenienced. The fact is I considered it a great honor and privilege to participate in a critical situation. It was dramatic. There was an accident, there was bent steel, broken glass, there was blood, there were victims (none fatal) and I was helping.

It makes me wonder if the eyes of Jesus beheld the world as a sort of huge cosmic automobile accident—with 100% casualties—casualties which include His beloved children and brethren. Is there not this type of grief in the words of the Apostle Paul?

I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Romans 9:2, 3).

A Deep Concern

The faultless doctrine and towering intellect of the Apostle Paul did not douse, but rather ignited, his love and care for others. There was a reality and certainty to his convictions as it related to his concern for lost souls. Similar love and care for the lost forms an

integral part of what it means for a Christians to be conformed into the likeness of Jesus (Romans 8:29). To imitate the godly (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1) means to care about the lost. Every believer, at some level and in some form must reflect, in their thoughts and actions, the sentiment of Paul.

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved (Romans 10:1).

“**Desire**” in the Greek *ἐβδόκία* means a feeling of strong emotion in favor of something. This was Paul’s passion for his fellow Israelite. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) Jesus doesn’t allow us to consider any man who crosses our paths (especially the infirmed—spiritually or otherwise) outside the boundaries of our concern. And yet it somehow seems that this burning compassion is in short supply. Why is that?

Minimizing Death

Could it be the invisibility of death? If I were the devil I would want to keep death out of sight. I wouldn’t want people to ponder what happens when they die. I would want them to think their deaths will be as mundane, eventless and antiseptic as their lives. Could it be that the beautifully padded coffins we place in magnificent scenic gravesides we speed past during rush hour keep death at a safe distance?

The cemeteries are no longer placed by churches requiring a weekly contemplation of our own mortality. In times past and in other lands, death was much more visible and hideous. Famines, plagues and persecutions would spur great Christian relief and evangelistic efforts—we saw a small example of this with the church’s response to the tsunami and Hurricane Rita; the church responded heroically. But, for the most part, modern culture hides death, hiding what Solomon (the wisest of all men) spoke of in nightmarish terms.

Her house is the way to hell, descending to the chambers of death (Proverbs 7:27).

Jesus describes death as a “**place of torment**” (Luke 16:28).

Ashamed of the Gospel

Or perhaps Christians are ashamed of the gospel. That the Apostle Paul said he wasn't ashamed of the gospel (Romans 1:16) must mean that shame is a possibility. *Are we ashamed of the gospel?* Maybe we don't want to be associated with the embarrassing door to door antics of the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Maybe we recoil at the thought of somehow being put on the same shelf as Jim Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart. Maybe we're disgusted at the marketing strategies of modern Christianity and how similar many evangelical efforts resemble Amway or Herbalife or other multi-level marketing networks.

Or maybe it's how the media portrays Christians, as simple, unthinking, unreasonable, mindless bigots who have an unwarranted hatred or fear of anyone unlike themselves. Whatever it is, it can become paralyzing for many Christians.

The Power of the Gospel

Paul gave a reason why he wasn't ashamed of the gospel: it was the power of God to salvation (Romans 1:16). Whatever it is that's stifling Christians, they must never forget that these aspersions are like fiery darts which the shield of faith quenches (Ephesians 1:16).

Efforts to degrade the Christian faith cannot diminish the power of the gospel any more than sticking your finger in the barrel of a shotgun can somehow dissuade the buckshot. Yet this finger does succeed if it can convince the Christian to remain silent and know his place—to not pull the trigger. Young elephants are chained to a small stake in the ground which holds them still. When they grow up they can pull the stake up with ease but don't because they've been convinced that it's a useless endeavor.

Blowing the Trumpet

I've offered a few possible reasons why a lack of concern for the lost is endemic among evangelicals. Whether it's lack of

compassion, denial of the reality of death, fear of embarrassment, lack of confidence in the power of the gospel or just plain laziness, we need to repent of this evangelistic stupor.

Despite the way our various human environments make us feel there is a responsibility Christians have before God Himself. We must blow the trumpet!

But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes *any* person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. So you, son of man: I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked *man*, you shall surely die!' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked *man* shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul (Ezekiel 33:6-9).

In order for Christians to deliver themselves from the responsibility of contributing to a lost soul, they are to blow the trumpet. The blowing of the trumpet is the warning that man, being sinful, will face the sword of judgment.

I'm seeking to blow the trumpet right now—I pray my tune is not uncertain (1 Corinthians 14:8). Perhaps someone handed you this tape, CD, or paper to read. They are seeking to blow the trumpet. The tune goes something like this: Do not face your Maker and Judge apart from the love, grace, mercy and sacrifice of Jesus. We spoke of the nightmare of death. But Jesus died to take away the sting of death (1 Corinthians 15:55) and satisfy the divine judgment of God (Isaiah 53:6) which must and will fall upon all who have sinned (Romans 3:23; 6:23).

Solomon's words confirmed the darkness of death. But he also taught that man is not left at the mercy of death. He also taught that...

The law of the wise is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death (Proverbs 13:14).

Coming to Jesus

And how is one turned away from the snares of death? From Genesis to Revelation there is only one answer to that question—*Jesus*. Jesus taught that those who believe in Him He will raise up on the last day (John 6:40); whoever believes in Him will never die (John 11:26); that if we confess Jesus with our lips and believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead, we will be saved (Romans 10:9). With singular, unparalleled love, power and authority Jesus taught,

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, *there* you may be also (John 14:1-3).

Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).

Coming to Jesus means believing in Him alone for salvation from sins. A true belief is a belief which produces a will and desire to acknowledge His rightful Lordship as King of our hearts—to see His commandments as good and right. Coming to Jesus means coming to His table—the Lord's Supper and coming to His body the church—where His victory is preached, His praises are sung and His sacraments are administered. This is the trumpet that is to be blown—and “**there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents**” (Luke 15:10).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How do you suppose Jesus beholds the world? How did the Apostle Paul feel about his fellow Israelite?
2. Why do you suppose that concern for the lost is in short supply today?
3. What have you found to be the general sentiment regarding death in our culture?
4. What does it mean to be ashamed of the gospel? Has this happened to you? Give examples.
5. What is the power of the gospel and how should this inform and direct our actions?
6. What does it mean to “blow the trumpet” and how can you participate in that responsibility?
7. Is man left at the mercy of death? Explain.
8. How is man rescued from death? Have you been rescued?

Romans 10:2-4

The End of the Law

April 26, 2015

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:1-4).

Introduction

It seems like so many years ago (almost 25) when I was approached by the elders of this church and asked to be the pastor. I balked at the offer for numerous reasons, not the least of which was an intense feeling of being unqualified; the previous pastor was held in high regard as a dynamic preacher and expositor of the word. This is not false humility. There were others with the same concern, asking me if I thought I had the gifts necessary for such a post.

After some pretty intense persuading, I took the position, verbalizing what you probably don't want to hear from your new pastor—something along the lines of “I'll take the position but please don't expect much.” But I was surrounded by people who weren't willing to accept such a commitment to mediocrity. Perceiving the lack of depth in my preaching, I would hear admonitions along the lines of “If you took your job seriously you would dig deeper into the word” or “We need theologians in the pulpit, not entertainers.”

I tried not to overly concern myself with whether or not these statements came from a healthy spirit of encouragement or sheer frustration. The real question was: *Are these admonitions valid?* It was in a pastoral epistle in my King James Bible that I read:

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

“Study” *spoudason* means to be diligent. To “rightly” divide *orthotomounta* means to cut straight the word of truth. The Scriptures are not a bunch of unrelated scraps, puzzle pieces that don’t interlock forming no discernible image. I didn’t want to be one of those clergymen to whom Jesus would say: **“Have you not read” (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16, 42; Mark 2:25; 12:10, 26, etc.)?** I sought to make it a high priority to understand and accurately preach/teach the word.

Again, it is not with false humility that I do not view this as a strength. I struggle with languages, I don’t read as quickly as I would like, I have difficulty recalling resources and authors. Nonetheless, that became a goal. I didn’t want to be like a teammate I had in college who had such weak legs he was embarrassed to go into the weight room—the very place he needed to be.

I wasn’t trying to be an egghead at the expense of love for God and my neighbor. I simply desired to make sure that the things I said were accurate. It wasn’t long before I encountered some serious pushback from those who saw me taking this direction. One former member accused me of idolizing intellect. Another Christian friend suggested that I was placing the Holy Bible on par with the Holy Father, Holy Son and Holy Spirit.

To this day, I find myself engaged with people who lament what they feel to be an overemphasis on the christian’s engagement with Scripture. I don’t want to be insensitive to this. There certainly is a temptation to treat theology as a sort of erector set—a robotics contest where your robot beats up the other robots. The word of God must be handled with love and humility—with the sense that we are interacting with something much greater than ourselves.

But what is equally (if not more) dangerous is allowing a mystical or traditional source—or some other form of divine communication—to wrench the truth from the lips of God. As Jesus warned:

And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition (Matthew 15:3)?

It must be said that people in this camp (the camp of allowing the Scriptures a say but not a final and ultimate say) have not dismissed the Scriptures entirely. Whether it was those with whom

Jesus contended, or the Apostle Paul, or those who continue this methodology today, they still hold their Bibles with reverence—with respect. Generally, this attack on those who study only surfaces when the student embraces and successfully argues for an unpopular doctrine. Since you can't win the biblical argument, you compromise the importance of study and doctrine.

People are more than happy to appeal to the text until it becomes apparent that they are reading it amiss. God gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). Where should we be more humble than when God speaks? To this we all must be, and remain, committed.

It is in this arena that Israel (the covenant people of God) went sideways. It is important to keep in mind that the Apostle did not become frustrated or angry. As we discussed last time, Paul's sentiment and prayer for Israel is gracious.

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved (Romans 10:1).

But his love for his fellow Israelite doesn't keep him from concisely and forcefully exposing their problem—a problem with dire consequences.

For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge (Romans 10:2).

A Zeal for God

These are not professing atheists or agnostics. They are theists (those who profess a belief in God) and they are zealous. “**Zeal**” *zelon* means they have a deep concern—a highly religious devotion. The word is from *zeo*, meaning to be hot, fervent, to seethe and bubble over. This was probably not difficult for Paul to understand. He may have very well been reflecting on his own life as Jew.

For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to* destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more

**exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers
(Galatians 1:13, 14).**

What is amazing (and should be a bit disconcerting) about this verse is that Paul doesn't seem to be disputing the authenticity of Israel's zeal for God. Many of us are shamed by the devotion displayed by other religious communities. There is something inside of us that says, "How can they be wrong if they have such strong (and often admirable) convictions?"

But zeal and devotion does not equal truth. One would be hard-pressed to find greater zeal, devotion and conviction than we see with a suicide bomber. But even their willingness to die for their cause does not automatically validate the cause. Paul highlights their deficiency in the second half of the verse, "**but not according to knowledge.**"

Knowledge

Years ago I attended a theological debate where one participant clearly demonstrated a superior understanding of the subject. I recall the other participant taking the podium and, with a dramatic pause, began to appeal to how his opponent's view *just didn't feel right*. "Can't you sense that there is something wrong with his view?" There is this George Benson "We tried to talk it over but the words got in the way" methodology that has always made inroads into the church. So often in counseling I have found that if I can just get someone to accurately articulate what is going on the battle is half won.

Paul bemoans that the Jews had zeal, but not according to knowledge. The word for "**knowledge**" *epignosis* indicates a more thorough participation in the acquiring of knowledge on the part of the learner. In the New Testament it often refers to a knowledge which powerfully influences our religious life—laying claim to personal involvement...¹⁸ meaning the discernment which comes in

¹⁸ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

connection with possessing salvation which helps in determining the moral conduct—a knowledge which enables one to avoid error.¹⁹

We must be careful that we don't interpret this to mean an exhaustive, comprehensive and entirely accurate understanding of Scripture and of the God of the Scriptures. Nor should we understand this to mean the attainment of moral perfection. This might be more accurately understood as entirely missing the point, similar to what Paul wrote about himself, having **“acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Timothy 1:13).**

For it is better, as *Augustine* says, even to go limping in the right way than to run with all our might out of the way. If we would be really religious, let us remember that what *Lactantius* teaches is true, that true religion is alone that which is connected with the word of God.²⁰

What is this great error—the darkness of which plagues men to this very day?

For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God (Romans 10:3).

Establishing a Righteousness

There are two active participles in the verse: The word **“ignorant”** *agnoountes* meaning ‘unknowing’ or ‘not knowing’ and the word **“seeking”** *zetountes*, which means ‘to seek to do something, but without success.’²¹ And they both have to do with the word **“righteousness”** *dikaiosynen*. Even though this is aimed particularly at Israel's use (or misuse) of the law, it seems woven into human nature to aim at some sort of righteousness. People want to feel

¹⁹ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

²⁰ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 10:2). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

²¹ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 661). New York: United Bible Societies.

justified—comfortable in their ethics. And there may be nothing more savage than a man who has reached that level of self-contentment in the establishment of his own righteousness.

The world is fond of quoting the Sermon on the Mount (“Judge not”) when the Christian voices their opinion on matters of ethics. But that same world is not shy to bring the hammer down when others fall short of the ethics they have established. How true this was in the religious environment by which Jesus was surrounded. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector was triggered by this very sentiment.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt (Luke 18:9).

A television and movie personality recently tweeted his disdain for a young woman who posed with a giraffe she had shot. He received 27 million hits and the girl received death threats. The TV star is a high profile atheist, embracing vehement anti-Christian ethics. But here he has a system of ethics (or a least a single action) that he simply despises. He resents the judgmental implications of Christian ethics. They should not judge! Yet at the same time he holds this young lady in contempt and continuously assails her.

One of the most dangerous consequences of establishing our own righteousness is the false perception that we have succeeded in keeping it. This inevitably yields an unchecked self-righteousness and a blindness to the fact that in this accusatory self-righteousness we are engaging in the very action we detest in others. But that is not the most dangerous consequence.

The most dangerous consequence is the soul-damning lack of submission to the righteousness of God. *If I have my own righteousness, why do I need the righteousness of someone else—even God’s?* This is the blindness, the “**ignorance**” of God’s righteousness.

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain

Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:8, 9).

In light of this error, Paul highlights the critical element which they had missed in their religious devotions to the law.

For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:4).

The End of the Law

This may be one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted verses in all of Scripture. So let me be quick to say that Paul is not promoting the extinction of the law of God as a system of ethics—as if his readers would conclude that it is now acceptable in the eyes of God to lie, steal and cheat—to disregard the commands as a means by which we should govern our lives.

There are various opinions on what the “**end**” *telos* of the law means. Some suggest that it means that the purpose or goal (which *telos* can easily mean) of the law is to show forth Christ in types and shadows (Colossians 2:16, 17). In this respect the Old Covenant is now obsolete because the substance has come. Others understand it as that which has been fulfilled in Christ (Matthew 5:17). Theologically, I see these both as true and will not engage in a long discussion about which is exegetically more likely.

Whether we understand the law here as types and shadows, as an old administration or as a law revealing our sin and need for a Savior—the conclusion is the same—it is believing in Christ—as Paul will soon write “**confess(ing) with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believ(ing) in your hearts that God has raised Him from that dead**” (Romans 10:9) that yields a true righteousness—a righteousness which God both demands and provides.

He shows that he is a false interpreter of the law, who seeks to be justified by his own works; because the law had been given for this end, — to lead us as by the hand to another righteousness: nay,

whatever the law teaches, whatever it commands, whatever it promises, has always a reference to Christ as its main object; and hence all its parts ought to be applied to him. But this cannot be done, except we, being stripped of all righteousness, and confounded with the knowledge of our sin, seek gratuitous righteousness from him alone.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some qualities you look for in a pastor? Which qualities are absolutely essential?
2. What are some common accusations and temptations that come with those who are dedicated to study the word?
3. What will replace the Scriptures if they are not used as the primary resource of our understanding of God and things?
4. Is it good to be zealous? Is it sufficient to be zealous? Explain your answers.
5. Why is knowledge important? Do we have to know everything? Do we have to be perfect?
6. What does it mean to establish your own righteousness? What are the dangers of this?
7. What is the “righteousness of God” and how does one get it?
8. In what respect is Christ the “end of the law”?

Romans 10:5

Do and Live?

May 17, 2015

For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, “The man who does those things shall live by them” (Romans 10:5).

Introduction

In the above passage, the Apostle Paul cites an Old Testament passage that had been twisted beyond recognition by the religious community of his day. There may be nothing worse than bad religion. And the worst religion is that which most closely resembles and recites the language of that which is true. I myself am often conflicted regarding which is more dangerous—benign secular entertainment or heretical “Christian” entertainment.

In Paul’s great love and desire that his fellow Israelite “**be saved**” (Romans 10:1), he addresses their effort to “**establish their own righteousness**” rather than submitting to “**righteousness of God**” (Romans 10:3). There may not be a greater error in all of Scripture (fig leaves, towers and hand-maidens) than trying to help God save sinners. It is the central pursuit of all false religions to somehow establish through human effort a way to sufficiently impress God that He may feel inclined to open the gates of glory.

Paul will draw upon a flagship passage in the Old Covenant (Leviticus 18:5) that can easily be misunderstood to teach that very thing.

For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, “The man who does those things shall live by them” (Romans 10:5).

An Isolated Verse

We must beware of those who would develop a theology from one isolated verse. I cringe at times when I walk into a church and see the verse they have chosen to highlight as thematic of their doctrine. Hebrews 13:8 “**Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever**” is often used in churches embracing sign gifts,

continued revelation and faith-healers. Not to be distracted here, but not a single one of those churches sacrificed a lamb. Since Jesus is immutable, it does not follow that His mode of operation with humanity is also immutable—some things look forward, some look back, and some are accomplished.

Paul and Moses

What we must resist here is that Paul is contradicting Moses—as if Moses had one method of salvation and Paul (or Jesus) is offering another. The Westminster Confession, VII, 5, under the context of the covenant of grace, teaches:

This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament.

Moses (or Abraham, or Adam after the fall, for that matter) was not presented with a different way of salvation. So what do we make of a verse like this...especially since it is referenced in other passages as that which was violated resulting in God's fury (Ezekiel 20:21).

In recounting the exodus, we read:

Therefore I made them go out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them My statutes and showed them My judgments, 'which, *if* a man does, he shall live by them' (Ezekiel 20:10, 11).

There we have yet another reference to Leviticus 18:5; a “do this and live” presentation. Yet they failed miserably.

Yet the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not walk in My statutes; they despised My judgments, ‘which, if a man does, he shall live by them’; and they greatly defiled My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them in the wilderness, to consume them (Ezekiel 20:13).

We see “**if a man does, he shall live by them**” once again. The Ezekiel 21 passage (along with Nehemiah 9) unveils God’s patience with Israel’s stiff-necked rebellion. They despised God’s judgments, refused to walk in His statutes and profaned His Sabbaths, yet God would repeatedly withdraw His hand of judgment for His own name’s sake (Ezekiel 21:22).

God would eventually give them up to “**statutes that were not good and judgments by which they could not live**” (Ezekiel 21:25). One of the greatest judgments of God is to let man go where his own heart desires.

Perhaps the acme of their rebellion culminated in causing their “**firstborn to pass through the fire**” (Ezekiel 21:25; Jeremiah 32:35)—the sacrificing of their children on the grill of the false god, Molech.²² Ezekiel then records: “**In this too your fathers have blasphemed Me, by being unfaithful to Me**” (Ezekiel 21:27).

The *Do and Live* Principle

Incorporated throughout this entire passage is numerous references to Leviticus 18:5—this *do and live* principle. Never once should we understand this to mean that Moses was presenting God’s covenant people with works righteousness—the idea that they could, by their mere obedience to the law of God, find approval in heaven.

Paul will soon pit that inclination against how “**the righteousness of faith**” speaks (Romans 10:6). The righteousness

²² *Moloch*. According to the rabbis, his statue was of brass, with a human form, but the head of an ox; it was hollow within, and heated from below, and the children to be sacrificed were cast into its arms.

of faith has something else entirely to say. But let us not miss the value of keeping the *do this and live* principle, and why this should be ever before us. Jesus did not hesitate to bring the full force of this into His discussions.

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?” So he answered and said, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,*’ and *‘your neighbor as yourself.’*” And He said to him, “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live” (Luke 10:25-28).

Unlike the account with the rich young ruler, we don’t see the inevitable conclusion that **“with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:23)**. First, and perhaps most importantly, we must appreciate what this principle accomplishes in our redemption. Paul had taught earlier in this epistle:

Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).

Paul makes a similar point in his epistle to the Galatians:

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “*Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.*” But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God *is* evident, for “*the just shall live by faith.*” Yet the law is not of faith, but “*the man who does them shall live by them*” (Galatians 3:10-12).

Verse 10 in the Greek essentially teaches that one must “**continue**” *emmenei*, to remain in at all times. And what one must remain in at all times is “**all things (*pasin tois*) written in the book of the law, to do them.**” It was from the folly of this thinking that Paul himself had to be delivered. In his own testimony, he conveyed that prior to faith he viewed himself “**concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless**” (Philippians 3:6). Paul continues his testimony regarding the law in Romans 7:

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me (Romans 7:7-10).

But Paul does not blame the law. He sets the guilt squarely upon his own sin:

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure (Romans 7:13).

We cannot overestimate the devastation that befalls the covenant community and the surrounding un-evangelized cultures when the law of God is extracted from equation. “**In order that sin might be shown to be sin**” may very well be the chief end of the law. Apart from this, the world will see no need for a Savior and the church will begin to view the Christ and His cross as a helpful yet dispensable element of the faith. *Do this and live* becomes a critical message.

Responding to *Do and Live*

How does one respond to a *do and live* proposition? Do we tell ourselves this is merely hypothetical—after all, no one can actually do it? Does the New Covenant church exercise a collective exhale in relief that we are no longer under that oppressive Mosaic Covenant? Calvin gives a noteworthy assessment of the ministry of Moses:

That he might also instill into the minds of the people the love of righteousness, and implant in them the hatred of iniquity, promises and threatening were added; which proposed rewards to the just, and denounced dreadful punishments on sinners. It was now the duty of the people to consider in how many ways they drew curses on themselves, and how far they were from deserving anything at God's hands by their works, that being thus led to despair as to their own righteousness, they might flee to the haven of divine goodness, and so to Christ himself. This was the end or design of the Mosaic dispensation.²³

It is not difficult to find the promises and threatening in that Old Testament. It was often quite dramatic—plagues, earthquakes, enslavement, etc. The design of the threats, promises and afflictions were so that the people might learn to love righteousness, hate iniquity, consider their own failures and flee to Christ.

The big question for this morning is, to what extent does the law—the *do this and live* principle—accomplish this today among the people of God? Are the promises, threatenings, blessings and afflictions for another age entirely? Or can today's church, you and I, expect that in some manner we might expect that what happened to Israel with their disregard for God's law can happen to us? Does the fact that we are not under a covenant of works mean that we should not expect affliction from God due to our slothfulness and/or rebellion against His law or blessings from obedience?

²³ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 10:5). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

I think those who (as I certainly do) seek to protect that doctrine of justification by faith alone, prove too much when they view grace as something which removes God responding in displeasure to human rebellion—even of true believers. You’ll notice how similar the Westminster divines are to Calvin’s view of the ministry of Moses in their explanation of the value of the law for the believer. Westminster Confession of Faith 19, 6 explains:

6. Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin: and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve; and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof:²⁴ although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man's doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law; and, not under grace.

Think perhaps of a collective of doctors who are told that if they practice their craft with perfection all of their patients will live. So they study and practice and seek to perfect their skills. They are told that if they ‘do this’ their patients ‘will live’. They begin to

²⁴ The proof text for this portion is Leviticus 18:5.

discover that if they ignore the medical journals and practice medicine in an undisciplined and sloppy way, their patients remain sick and infirmed—disease spreads, and their utter disregard for the disciplines of their profession brings reproach upon them.

Yet if they seek to walk faithfully and in accord with the statutes of their field, patients tend to live longer and feel better—disease is held at bay and they find favor among the sick who seek to enter their communities for help. They would not say *do this and live* belongs to another dispensation. They would see evidence that *do this and live* is legitimate.

Yet there remains a problem—their patients eventually die. These physicians have come to realize the limitations of their skills against human disease. This is not an argument against *do this and live*. The greater the physician the clearer it becomes to him that the problem is not the medical journal; the problem is fallen humanity. This is a discovery that the rebels who follow “**statutes that were not good and judgments by which they could not live**” (Ezekiel 21:25) will never make. The fool will establish another goal or seek another answer.

But the wise man, through his efforts of obedience, will become acutely aware of his limitations, and by the grace of God he will flee to the only Physician who can and will provide eternal healing.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What is the worst religion? Explain.
2. What was the Apostle Paul's disposition toward his fellow Israelite? What was their great error?
3. Why is it dangerous to develop an entire theology on one isolated verse?
4. Did Paul contradict Moses? Explain.
5. Does the Old Covenant present grace of works/law? Explain.
6. Was Moses encouraging his followers to seek to reach heaven by obeying the law or the *do and live* principle?
7. How does the law work toward our redemption?
8. How should we respond to the *do and live* proposition?
9. Discuss the promises, threatenings, blessings and afflictions associated with obedience or disobedience to the law. Does this mean we are still under the law?
10. How far can obedience to the law take a person?

Romans 10:6, 7

The Righteousness of Faith

May 24, 2015

But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, “Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”” (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, “Who will descend into the abyss?”” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead) (Romans 10:6, 7).

Introduction

In the early 1980s, John Byrum and Bill Murray wrote a screenplay based upon a novel by W. Somerset Maugham entitled *The Razor's Edge*. The story is about a man's search for himself. Bill Murray plays Larry Darrell who enters into a series of disciplines and odysseys to find peace and salvation. A tagline explained the book/movie's title:

The pathway to salvation is as narrow and as difficult to walk as a razor's edge.

A line in the movie I found particularly engaging was when the main character, in his monastic pursuits, was meditating on the mountain peaks of India and arrived at the conclusion: “It's easy to be a holy man on top of a mountain.” I took this to mean that when one is entirely isolated from the world, there are limited distractions or temptations. By this standard, the veal is the holiest of animals.

The Value and Limitations of Environments

Certainly, Christians should be aware and concerned about their environments—**“Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals” (1 Corinthians 15:33)**; the passage to which the Apostle Paul alludes in Romans 10:6-7 is extracted from God's concern through Moses of that very thing (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). The delivered Israelites were not to be seduced by the gods of Egypt (where they had left) or the gods of the land they were to possess (Deuteronomy 18:14; 29:18).

There are no holy men on the tops of mountains—just men who are in an environment where their un-holiness is not easily observed. And journeys, as enjoyable and informative as they might be, will not provide the deep answers—there is no travel itinerary that is a pathway to salvation. There may be good reasons to seek to alter your surroundings—to move from one place to another—but there is no journey that ends in redemption unless that journey is taken by those already redeemed. **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7)**; it is not the *conclusion* of a quest.

The Apostle Paul, somewhat roughly, appeals to the words of Moses given toward the end of Deuteronomy prior to entering the Promised Land. After setting before His people blessings and curses, God calls his people to **“obey the voice of the Lord...to keep His commandments and statutes which are written in this Book of the Law, and turn to the Lord...with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 30:9, 10)**. We then see the quotation:

For this commandment which I command you today is not *too* mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).

The Israelites were not to be overtaken by the allurements of their journeys. I recall, as a young man having endured some tragedies, having an insatiable desire to go to New Zealand. It had been described to me by a friend in college in such a way as to capture my imagination. And I did go and spent quite a bit of time there. It was beautiful and I met some wonderful people who I am still in contact with. But it wasn’t as if I found some elusive message or mysterious wisdom in the waterfalls of Milford Sound.

Two Books

It may be a profound observation by Augustine that **“The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page”**, but there are limitations on what that particular book—this theatre of the world—can provide. There is another book, a book Moses referred to as **“this Book of the Law”** containing commands and statutes—wisdom from heaven. It is a Spirit-inspired book that breaks the barriers of creaturely boundaries—where the creature hears from the Creator.

There was a junior high school in Hermosa Beach when I was growing up that actually had a passage from Scripture carved into its exterior wall. It is now a community center, but I believe the passage remains. It is from Proverbs 29:18. They used the King James Version, which can easily be misunderstood, for it reads:

**Where there is no vision, the people perish
(Proverbs 29:18).**

It would be very easy to understand that translation to encourage dreamers, those who would imagine great things and achieve them through their own innovation and ingenuity. Not that there is anything inherently wrong with innovation and ingenuity. But the English Standard Version captures that meaning with greater accuracy:

Where there is no prophetic vision (*hazon* speaks of divine revelation) the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law (Proverbs 29:18).

The second half of the verse (which was left off of the school’s wall) brings the point of the verse into clearer focus. There is information that we need, that God has graciously provided, that we are inclined to ignore.

Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is

swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish...My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:1-3, 6).

The despising of the information God graciously conveys is destructive, but the Apostle will soon give the other side—the good news—that the proclaiming of the information is life-giving: **“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17).**

The Significant Journey

No, there is no pilgrimage you can take that will grant you redemption or salvation, but the Scriptures—I daresay the central message of the Scriptures—very much speaks of a journey taken by the eternal Son of God. It’s a journey containing events—**“things into which the angels long to look” (1 Peter 1:12)**, where **“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory” (John 1:14)**. It is the journey that Christ Himself took when He **“died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:4)**, and **“after making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3)** where **“he always lives to make intercession for (us)” (Hebrews 7:25).**

The Righteousness of Faith

It is not our journey but the journey of Christ that brings redemption. And how does Paul communicate this? He gives words, as it were, to **“the righteousness of faith”** as if it speaks. And what does it say? **“Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend to heaven?’ (that is to bring Christ down from above).”** Christ has ascended into heaven. There is no need to look farther. That which is needed is complete. Let us not seek to invalidate His accomplished work (that is to bring Christ down from above) by invoking other

methods of redemption. He is our ascended Priest and we need no other.

Paul continues, **“or who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring up Christ from the dead)” (Romans 10:7).** *Who will descend into the abyss* is not to be asked because the abyss—that is death itself—has been conquered and will be fully vanquished at His return (1 Corinthians 15:26). When Jesus taught that **“everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:26),** it wasn’t an empty promise. The author of Hebrews writes:

But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (Hebrews 2:9).

When Paul writes **“(that is, to bring up Christ from the dead)”** he is not speaking of the resurrection but of seeking to remove His passion, His suffering by looking elsewhere for the satisfaction of it. It has been said of this passage:

The benefit of Christ’s death and resurrection is now communicated to us by the gospel: there is then no reason for us to seek anything farther.²⁵

When the blind man of John 9 had been given sight and was consequently cast out of the synagogue, Jesus found him and asked him if he believed in the Son of Man. **“He answered, And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him” (John 9:36)?** Jesus didn’t tell him to seek Him in heaven or in the grave or over the sea. **“Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you’” (John 9:37).**

The righteousness of faith tells us to believe and to confess. Next time, we will investigate in more detail what that means. Let us now recognize that Jesus continues to speak to us—to come to us—by word and sacrament. Let us set our hearts toward that as we come to His Table.

²⁵ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 10:6). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you heard the phrase, ‘find yourself’? What do you think it means?
2. Should Christians be concerned about their environment? What was a concern for Israel regarding Egypt and Canaan? What are some examples today?
3. Is there a journey man can take that ends in redemption? Explain.
4. What are the limitations of what you can learn in a journey in this life?
5. What are the “two books” to which we have access? What meant in Proverbs 29:18 where we read, **“Where there is no vision, the people perish”**?
6. What journey should Christians concern themselves with? What journey redeems?
7. What is the “righteousness of faith” and what does it say?
8. Why should we not ask “who will ascend to heaven” or “who will descend to the abyss”?

Romans 10:8-10

Believe and Confess

May 31, 2015

But what does it say? “*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Romans 10:8-10).

But what does it say? “*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*” (that is, the word of faith which we preach) (Romans 10:8).

The Word is Near

Don't believe everything you read was an easy lesson for me to learn at a young age. Competing in athletics, I noticed how often the newspaper misspelled names and posted incorrect marks and scores. A high school friend was on a track team that was in a competition that was rained out. He went ahead and called in scores to the local paper on a track-meet that never happened! He had the shot-putters winning the high-jump and milers winning the pole vault. And it was all published!

Numerous news outlets on television and social media have brought this problem to greater light. In one respect it is helpful to hear different sides of the same story, since unbiased news is almost impossible. But sometimes the actual stated facts are different—some outlets are entirely satire, making up stories about events (like my friend's fictional track-meet) that never happened. And it is not just news.

Revisionists alter history and academic speculations are gripped as fact. Events as recent as the holocaust are now being questioned. I recently sat down to dinner with a man who spoke of things that happened 15 billion years ago as if he had been there—as

if to disagree with him would require a wholesale suspension of intellect.

The information we are given has a dramatic impact on the decisions we make. Having accurate information about what happened in the other room will determine the steps I take as a parent—about what happened across the country/world will determine steps I take as a citizen.

Having accurate information about where I come from and where I am going and how that will happen, as a created being, will determine much deeper things: It will determine what I believe is right, where I place my hope, what I will live for and what I might die for—what many have died for.

The Apostle Paul, because of his great love for his fellow countrymen, is addressing the great fool's errand in which they found themselves. They were engaged in the universal folly of seeking to establish their own righteousness. What made this particularly foolish is not that they were merely seeking to create their own system of ethics, but were seeking to find favor with God by those ethics—rather than putting themselves under, and freely receiving, the righteousness of God.

What made this error even more remarkable was that they did this with, as it were, Bibles in their hands—appealing to Moses. So even though they had the correct source of information, the teachers had led the sheep astray. It was this (this lack of proper instruction) which yielded such great compassion from Jesus.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:36-38).

As is the case today, there were plenty of *shepherds*—a church on every corner one might say—every last one of them (as Jesus taught) more than willing to **“tie heavy burdens, hard to bear...on people's shoulders...shut(ing) the king of heaven in people's faces...mak(ing) sons of hell” (Matthew 23).**

But by the grace of God the true word would come and prevail, the accurate information, which was the necessary means of grace to pull sinners out of their ignorance and darkness into the light; it is calling us to abandon our own righteousness and hear what the righteousness of faith has to say.

But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach) (Romans 10:8).

It is that apostolic message found in the church—in **“the word”**. Don’t ask who will ascend to heaven or who will descend into the abyss, as if these things had not been done. The successful mission of God the Son had been proclaimed to them, as Paul wrote, **“the word of faith which we preach”**. And it is the glorious task of every faithful church to herald that message. Paul wrote to Timothy, his young protégé in the ministry:

If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed (1 Timothy 4:6).

From generation to generation there is a message—**“the word”** to *rhema*—that is to fill the church like incense, what Paul called the **“aroma of Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:15; Genesis 8:21; Exodus 29:18; Ephesians 5:2)**. It was what the Apostle received and what he subsequently delivered. We see this with the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23), but it is the same with the gospel itself.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3).

This was the word that had been preached to them by the Apostle—**“the word of faith”** *te rhema tes pisteos*. This word was in their mouths and in their hearts—mouth and heart *stomati* and *kardia* playing a prominent role in Paul’s presentation in this entire passage.

But let us recognize that this is the information from heaven (Acts 7:53; Hebrews 2:2). It is self-authenticating and carries its own authority (Hebrews 4:12, 13).

Ironically, Christians are often assailed for approaching their faith as if it is a blind leap into highly disputable and dubious myths and legends—as if the church fears answering the tough questions. But it is quite the opposite. What you will find coming from the lips of the new supervisors of your souls is a demand in this life to believe, without question, certain things that will have dire consequences for your souls—whether it be news, history, philosophy or scientific conclusions. The Apostle informs the church that the truth is all around them—in their mouths and hearts.

Hence the faithful derive from this passage remarkable consolation with regard to the certainty of the word; for they may no less safely rest on it, than on what is actually present.²⁶

What is this truth? What is this word? The Apostle had informed us what we should not do; but what should we do? We now turn to one of the more highly quoted passages in all of Scripture when it comes to conversion.

...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Romans 10:9, 10).

Believe and Confess

Any sentence that ends with “**you will be saved**” deserves wide-eyed attention. The salvation of souls is no small matter. There are two things we are called to do in relation to two other things. We are to “**believe**” and “**confess**” in relation to the *resurrection* and *Lordship* of Christ. *What does this all mean?*

The order of these things is sometimes the topic of controversy, but since Paul reverses the order in verse 10 (in his

²⁶ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 10:8). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

explanation of what has actually happened—with the heart we believe, with the mouth we confess), it should be obvious. There is no true confession apart from prior saving faith. **“...no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3).**

What does it mean to believe? What is this saving/justifying faith (as seen in verse 10)? In short, saving or justifying faith *pisteuo* is an act of God’s grace where the elect are enabled to believe. It is the work of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts, ordinarily through the word preached and sacraments administered (2 Cor. 4:13, Eph. 1:17–19, Eph. 2:8, Rom. 10:14, 17, 1 Pet. 2:2, Acts 20:32, Rom. 4:11, Luke 17:5, Rom. 1:16–17).

Through this gracious God-given faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaks therein. Paul put it this way:

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Much more can be said of saving faith, but I will only mention two things: First, the principal acts of saving faith (that which I believe the Apostle has in mind in this passage) are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12, 13).

Lastly, it should be a source of great comfort to know that true saving/justifying faith may, at times, be weak or strong (Matthew 6:30), assailed and weakened (Luke 22:31), but it will always get the victory, growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

To put it in the form of a simple catechism question (WSC, 86):

Question: What is faith in Jesus Christ?

Answer: Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, (Heb. 10:39) whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered to us in the gospel. (John 1:12, Isa. 26:3–4, Phil. 3:9, Gal. 2:16)²⁷

The second thing we are called to do is to “**confess**” with our mouths. “**Confess**” *homologeses* means to consent, admit or, more specifically, to agree. It seems like a funny thing to add to such a profound and sobering passage of eternal consequence. I recall being presented with this shortly after having come to faith. I thought I had better find someone to confess my faith to lest I die prior to fulfilling my own salvation. I might have been overly concerned, yet Jesus did teach:

So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven (Matthew 10:32, 33).

I don’t think we need turn confession to men into a sacrament or, even worse, into a work which yields salvation. Peter failed miserably in this area—truly his faith was assailed. But Christ had prayed for him, so his weak flesh was carried through the intercession of his High Priest. He failed, but his faith did not.

But let us recognize that our faith is not to remain a matter of personal secrecy. We are to confess with our mouths what we believe in our hearts. Years ago I asked an elder in a church to speak to the youth about his faith. He responded that he does not wear his faith on his sleeve and refused the offer.

²⁷ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs.* (1996). (3rd edition.). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Hand and forehead are so often used today as sensational eschatological markings (Revelation 13:16; Deuteronomy 6:8). But I would take hand and forehead (as in the law) to mean what we think and how we act—our head and our hands are our beliefs, which are followed by actions commensurate with those beliefs. If there is fire, it follows at some level there must be light, flame and heat. Or to put it in the words of our Savior: “...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34).

Lordship and Resurrection

And what is it we are to believe and confess? We are to believe in the resurrection. It is short, simple and central, yet to believe in the resurrection means believing in so many other things. If we believe He rose again, we must believe He also died; if we believe He died, we must also believe that He actually lived before He died (He was not a mere story or phantom). Digging deeper would unveil belief in the virgin birth, the righteous life, the vicarious death (meaning that He died for others). I daresay the resurrection is a synecdoche²⁸ for the totality of the accomplished work of redemption.

And finally, and probably experientially the most difficult, is the confession of the Lordship of Christ. What glorious words of approbation from Christ for the church at Pergamum, when He conveyed:

**I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is.
Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny
my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful
witness, who was killed among you, where Satan
dwells (Revelation 2:13).**

In an environment which is becoming increasingly hostile to the faith it is a great source of encouragement to hear of (especially young Christians, but indeed of all Christians) the faithful who are willing to speak up—to be willing to interject (not in a rude or arrogant manner) some Christian principle which reveals that you/we are, like Paul, bondslaves of Christ.

²⁸ A figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole or the whole for a part, the special for the general or the general for the special.

Let us be reminded that when the Roman governor sought to release Jesus, it was God's covenant people who reminded him: **"If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar"** (John 19:12). A perplexed Pilate asked them: **"Shall I crucify your King?"** And the chief priests, exposed their uncircumcised hearts by taking the mark of the beast: **"We have no king but Caesar"** (John 19:15). And many in the church today would understand **"render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"** (Luke 20:25) to mean almost the same thing.

It is through our confessing with our mouths that the kingdom advances from generation to generation. It was in a very politically charged environment that an 86 year-old Christian man named Polycarp, a direct pupil of the apostle John, a bishop in Smyrna, was arrested on the charge of "being a Christian," which was viewed as being a politically dangerous cult whose rapid growth needed to be stopped.

Amidst an angry mob, the Roman proconsul took pity on such a gentle old man. They sought to convince Polycarp to utter some simple words and engage in a small gesture—"Caesar is Lord" is all he had to say and to administer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's statue would yield deliverance from what would be a horrible death.

Polycarp's response was, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" The Caesars of history have been known to suffer Christians who profess Christ as Prophet and Priest, but they will endure no king—especially not a King of kings. The old man was burned alive at the stake. And though he had contributed a great deal in his long, faithful life as a Christian and elder, it has been said that his greatest contribution to the Christian faith was his martyred death.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Do you believe everything you read? How do you discriminate? What difference does accurate information make?
2. What is the universal folly of seeking to establish your own righteousness? What does it mean to submit to the righteousness of God?
3. Why are teachers so important?
4. What should every faithful church herald?
5. Is the Christian faith a blind leap? Are there those who would seek to have you take a blind leap? Explain.
6. Define saving/justifying faith. Can it be assailed? Can it be defeated?
7. What does it mean to confess and why is it important? Discuss what the Bible means when it speaks of the hand and forehead.
8. What is it a person is called to believe? Explain why this is critical.
9. What are we called to confess? Have you found this to be difficult? Why is this so important?

Romans 10:11-13

Riches or Shame?

June 7, 2015

For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:11-13).

For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame” (Romans 10:11).

“For the Scripture says...”

I was speaking to a young man recently who made the observation that it just doesn't make sense to approach life as if there is no God. He and I were in hearty agreement on that. Yet this man often displays open ridicule for the Christian faith, both in words and actions. Sadly, the opening phrase of this passage—**“for the Scripture says”**—would mean very little to him. But it should mean everything. To the Apostle, it was synonymous with God speaking (Romans 9:17).

The general revelation (the things my young friend observed that led him to conclude there must be God) might be compared to a huge forest fire. From a certain vantage point it is marvelous and even beautiful, but at some point you realize that you're trapped and there is no exit. For apart from special revelation—**“For the Scripture says”**—the message necessary to show the door to life is not revealed.

But God is a gracious God. And He reveals through His word the means by which we can escape the fire. It is all about us, yet we live as if it is expendable. This was the observation made by Stephen, which enraged the religious community, leading to his being stoned. **“You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (Acts 7:53)**. Today we might say, ‘You who place the Bible in a prominent bookshelf, yet never read it or seek to obey it.’

But if we do read it, what does it say?

“Whoever believes on Him...”

We see here a very universal sentiment—*pas ho pisteuon*—all the one(s) trusting. I was reminded last night of a short dialogue/disagreement I had on social media on the issue of Calvinism/Predestination. Popping up in the thread in objection to the doctrines of grace (Calvinism/Predestination) was this verse. They would argue, “My Bible says, ‘whosoever believes.’” What this revealed to me was a fundamental misunderstanding of the doctrines of grace. I find it to be a nut not easily cracked.

Simply put, I too believe this verse (as did John Calvin and the rest of the Reformers). I believe that whosoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. The subterranean distinction between my friend and me is that I don’t think anyone will call apart from the grace of God—entirely!

Be that as it may, the call is an all call.

And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

The ‘all call’ is more a gracious command to repent. God **“commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).** **“Command”** *parangellei* means to announce what must be done. It is in opposition to our natures to enjoy the notion of being commanded—perhaps because of the selfishness, sinfulness or incompetence of those who make commands. But you might want to think of this as a command to a child to get on the sidewalk to avoid being hit by a car. Or the firefighter who is announcing what must be done to escape those flames by which you are surrounded.

There is a door of refuge from the flames and the door is “Him”—that is, Christ.

I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture (John 10:9).

In this particular passage, the ‘whosoever believes on Him’ is not followed by ‘will be saved’ but by...

“...will not be put to shame.”

The Scriptures are replete with announcements of the riches associated with the redemption found in Christ—that we will dwell in a **“city whose designer and builder is God...having the glory of God...like a most rare jewel...gates of pearls...no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb...no tears...and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain...prepared for (us)”** (Hebrews 11:10, 16; Revelation 21). This seems to be the best language has to offer when it comes to eternal peace and joy—though it will be greater still. Paul had earlier taught that he did not consider his present sufferings worthy to be compared with the glory which will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

But here Paul highlights that which will not happen. It has been said that grace is getting what we don't deserve, and mercy (which is also a form of grace) is not getting what we do deserve; and they are both glorious. In particular, what will not happen is we will not be **“put to shame”** *kataischynthesetai*.

Shame is the feeling of dishonor or disgrace. It is not a very popular concept. It seems today that the more guilty, the more derided, person is the one who makes another feel shame. There is such a fear of making another person feel bad or guilty or ashamed that we hold our tongues as they descend into the pit.

Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it (Psalm 141:5).

I have found that in theory people (even Christian people) will say they desire the courage and kindness of confrontation. But when you actually engage in it—it is a very unique person who receives it well. I recall an early encounter with this in the ministry where a man continually spoke inappropriately in a Bible study. I took him for a walk and tried to communicate as nicely as possible that what he was saying was outside the boundaries. He thanked me. He told me he appreciated my willingness to talk to him. Within a few weeks he and

his family left the church. It made him feel uncomfortable to see me—he felt ashamed.

We are tempted to delete shame from our vocabulary. Rather than shame, our transgressions are explained away as a disorder, poor environmental nurturing or societal ethical imposition. Those all might play some part. But there is a value to shame that is rapidly exiting the building of our current customs. I recall getting caught stealing as a kid. I was guilty and there was no sociological or psychological diagnosis to deliver me. The man caught me, he held my arm and called my dad, and I was horrified.

I should have been ashamed for stealing in the first place, but there is something about **“open shame”** *boset happanim*—or shame in the face of (Daniel 9:8). We can so easily justify our behavior within the caverns of our own corrupt hearts.

Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil (Ecclesiastes 8:11).

But when we stand before the searching eyes of God’s judgment, with the full awareness of our own sin and the full awareness of His awareness, we will have staggering appreciation for the words, **“will not be put to shame.”**

What is the value of shame? To the extent that things in this world are to set our hearts and minds to our latter end—to our inevitable conclusions—shame before man, as horrifying as that can be, is insignificant compared to shame before God and its attending judgment.

Paul now returns to the main point he seems to be making in chapters nine through eleven.

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:12-13).

“For there is no distinction...”

“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek” is a common theme in many of the letters in the New Testament of the

New Covenant (Romans 3:22; Acts 10:34, 35; 15:8, 9; Galatians 3:28, 29). It is probably most elaborately stated in Ephesians 2 & 3. Speaking of the Jewish and gentile Christians, Paul conveys that Christ has made us “both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself one new man...fellow citizens (*sympolites*—a very political noun)...This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Galatians 2:14-3:6). It is a very popular doctrine today—but we are not to think there is a different or unique plan for one nation or ethnic group over another.

“...for the same Lord over all...”

When Paul writes “**For the same Lord over all**” this is also a very universal statement. God is, as it were, an infinite storehouse—the “**good treasury, the heavens, which He will open**” (**Deuteronomy 28:12**), the riches of which are not restricted to a certain class or category of men, but is extended to “**all who call upon Him.**”

“For “*whoever*...”

We don’t regularly see intonations or voice inflections in Scripture, but I would think that if we did, we would see it in verse 13. The accent would be on the word “**whoever**”. Paul seems to be laboring the universality of the grace of God—by *universality*, I am not suggesting all men without exception, but rather all men without distinction. It is put before us to choose shame before God or the riches of Christ. Perhaps we can call upon the passage which Paul alluded to earlier (Romans 10:6-8; Deuteronomy 30:11-14), speaking of not asking who will ascend to heaven—keeping in mind that the *Jordan* is a type of death and *the land* foreshadows heaven (Hebrews 11:10).

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways,

and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them (Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What do we know without the Scriptures? What are the Scriptures and why do we need them Scriptures?
2. Is “whosoever believes” an argument against the doctrines of grace? Explain.
3. What is the ‘all call’? Explain the idea of a gracious command.
4. Do you find it difficult to address shameful behavior when you see it in others? How do you receive words from others that might make you feel shame? How should you receive those words?
5. How can shame be of value?
6. What did Christ accomplish in the relationship of the Jew and the gentile? How should we understand the promises of God in terms of Jew and gentile?
7. We are presented with riches or shame—life, good, death and evil, blessing and curse. What/how have you chosen?

Romans 10:14-15

Beautiful Feet

July 19, 2015

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “*How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!*” (Romans 10:14-15)

Introduction

I think it is safe to say there is not a verse in all of Scripture more critical to the welfare of the soul of man than the one which precedes this morning’s passage: **“For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13)**. Certainly, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, but apart from the salvation of our souls we cannot say that both of those will be realized.

As a father, husband, pastor and neighbor, I think I can say without fear of contradiction or pretense that the salvation of those I love (and even of those with whom I merely rub elbows) is of unceasing concern. And when we observe the overwhelming apostate nature of the west it should break out hearts. It is nothing less than sinful to not care about the souls of others.

The very weighty theological dynamics of the portion of Scripture we are currently studying (Romans 9-11) has, as its threshold, a heartfelt and passionate desire for the spiritual welfare of the lost—even those who would be the Apostle’s detractors. The Apostle Paul was not a Jonah bemoaning his ministry to the Ninevites.

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were

accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3).

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved (Romans 10:1).

In this love and compassion, Paul was an imitator of Jesus.

When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things (Mark 6:34).

The compassion of both Jesus and Paul led to instruction. There is a popular yet somewhat misdirected cliché going around that says, “Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.” While I appreciate that gospel preaching should be motivated by love and accompanied by good works, if there are no words then the gospel has not gone forth.

So if we are willing to concede that the preceding verse **“For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13)** is critical to the welfare of the human soul, what must happen—what is the means by which this takes place? If we were to investigate and seek to implement the phrase in the Great Commission, to **“make disciples” (Matthew 28:19)**, how would this be achieved? How do we fulfill the prime directive to the church—the directive without which there would be no church and redemption would come to a grinding halt?

The Apostle addresses this issue with a series of rhetorical questions in reverse order, proceeding from the effect to the cause. As we have seen the final effect—the salvation of the soul—is recorded in the preceding verse—**“whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”** We then see the first question.

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed (Romans 10:14a)?

Call and Believe

It might be helpful here to define what it means to call on the Name of the Lord. It sounds like a prayer—like when we call on somebody. Jesus compared it to knocking on a door.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him (Matthew 7:7-11).

So often we read this portion of the Sermon on the Mount only to lament that we have asked for so many things we haven't received. We can be so shortsighted—like knocking on the neighbor's door asking for a cup of sugar, being disappointed that the sugar was unavailable and oblivious to the truth that the neighbor has chosen to give us the entire house.

To call upon the Name of the Lord is to come before Him with **“boldness”** *parresian* (a state of confidence, sometimes implying intimidating circumstances) **“and access with confidence”** (Ephesians 3:12). It has been said:

...he who calls on God betakes himself, as it were, to the only true haven of salvation, and to a most secure refuge; he acts like the son, who commits himself into the bosom of the best and the most loving of fathers, that he may be protected by his care, cherished by his kindness and love, relieved by his bounty, and supported by his power. This is what no man can do who has not previously entertained in his mind such a persuasion of God's

paternal kindness towards him, that he dares to expect everything from him.²⁹

But none of this can happen—there is no calling on the Name of the Lord—unless one first **believes** *episteusan*. One must trust, have the inward confidence and reliance, to be able to say with Peter: **“You are the Christ, the son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16);** and, with Peter, to see the folly of the alternatives—to ask **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).**

In order to call, one must believe. *What is the means by which this takes place?*

And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard (Romans 10:14b)?

Believe and Hear

The ordinary means by which one comes to believe is by hearing. There is an outward call—a preaching, as it were, to the **“whole creation”** *pase te ktisei* (Mark 16:15). Of course, as indicated by verse 16 (**“not all obeyed the gospel”**) this outward calling, though necessary, is not sufficient to save. There must be an effectual calling by God Himself.

...who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began (2 Timothy 2:9).

Some things, to the praise of His glorious name, are left to the good pleasure, purpose and grace of God. We are in a manner, deaf, mute, blind, lame, guilty—in fact, *dead*—until God grants life by the application of His grace by the blood of Christ.

Our glorious task is to make a proclamation. And it must be added here that there is a precise object of that proclamation —people are to hear of **“Him”**—that is, of Jesus. The heart of that message is

²⁹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 10:14). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

that He died and rose again to save sinners (Romans 10:9). This is the water we pour on the ground, trusting that God will give **“the increase”** (1 Corinthians 3:7).

And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent (Romans 10:14c, 15a)?

Preach and Send

The first question here seems obvious: there is no message without a messenger. The second question is a little more difficult—*who is the one doing the sending here?* We might all agree that in a primary sense it is God, but there are those who say they are sent when they might not be sent by God at all.

I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds (Jeremiah 23:21, 22).

On the other hand, we see the ordaining of Isaiah, which was a direct and unmediated call straight from heaven:

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here *am* I! Send me.” And He said, “Go, and tell this people” (Isaiah 6:8, 9).

Even in the New Testament period we see the church fasting, praying, laying their hands upon and sending Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3). We live in a religious culture that has little regard for the role of the church in sending the herald—and the consequences have been disastrous. That which God has instituted to protect His people and His church—i.e. duly ordained and qualified men holding offices, overseeing and taking responsibility for the proper administration of these things—is egregiously neglected.

This may be too long of a topic for now, so suffice it to say that in God's sending of His preacher there is the *extraordinary*, the *ordinary* and the *informal*.

The *extraordinary* is seen in the prophet or apostle commissioned directly by God Himself. This extraordinary sending is one that God was pleased to conclude with the last apostle in the closing of the canon of Scripture.

The *ordinary* is the electing and ordaining of preachers by the church according to the pastoral epistles of those who have the inward (an inward desire to serve in this capacity) and outward (recognition by others of the moral, theological and gifts requisite to the office) calling to the ministry.

The *informal* is the willingness of any Christian at any time to say what needs to be said toward the redemption of their neighbor.

These three each play their part and they must play their part with a recognized dependence upon the other.

The Apostle then appeals to the words of the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 52:7):

As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!” (Romans 10:15b)

Beautiful Feet

The passage quoted describes the announcement that the exiles were soon to be delivered from captivity in Babylon. How joyful the Israelites would be to hear such a message, and not merely due to their imminent political deliverance, but the assurance that God's favor still rested upon them!

And so much deeper would Isaiah go as chapter 52 culminates with God baring...

...His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:10).

He then speaks of the suffering “**Servant...marred more than any man...So shall He sprinkle many nations**” (Isaiah 52:13-

15); this then transitions into Isaiah 53—perhaps the sweetest and most passionate Messianic passage in all of the Old Testament. Speaking of Jesus as...

...despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief...wounded for our transgression, bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed...and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:3-6; 1 Peter 2:24).

How beautiful are the feet of those who announce this peace—who bring these glad tidings of good things! The pure and simple message of the gospel is not one of striving for peace, but rather believing in the One who has secured that peace by His victory over sin and death. It is the announcement that the war has been won! That is the message. And if Christians are to have feet that are beautiful, they are not to stray from the centrality of those good tidings. We are to ever live in light of the message. We are to think of it always. It is to be our treasure.

I had the great honor of meeting and introducing Louis Zamperini in one of his final lectures. His biography records (as does the movie by the same name) his miserable and torturous time in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. Then there was a time when the camp commander informed the prisoners that the war was over—that America had won the war! You wonder what that news must have felt like.

A very elderly Dr. Winston Ross Cunningham spoke of his time in the Japanese Sham Shui Po POW camp toward the end of World War II. He recalled:

So we knew it was something out of the ordinary and then an American plane flew over and dropped leaflets telling us that the war was over, that the emperor had surrendered but just to stay where we were, that we were still the responsibility of the Japanese but this is how we knew that the war was over.

Can you imagine—just a leaflet with some information on it! He picked it up and read it. That’s all he had done. He was still dirty, hungry, tired, disheveled, unkempt, rumpled, dilapidated and still thousands of miles away from home. All he had was a leaflet with some information on it. The interviewer asked him how he reacted. This very elderly man (this was maybe 50 or 60 years later) could barely contain himself:

Hohoho, just terrific elation, just like being inebriated, walking on air, you know, it was terrific.

He loved to recall it! I don’t think it is a stretch to say that it was the best day of his life—just reading an announcement.

Of course, not everyone was elated that day. The enemy was not elated. And sadly there seem to be those who prefer to be prisoners. *King Rat* is a novel written in 1962 by James Clavell about another POW in Europe during World War II who, though insignificant in civilian life, mastered the art of being a prisoner—he preferred it and lamented the notion of freedom. May God grant eyes to see those chains of bondage and may He grant faith and repentance in and toward Christ that those chains might be broken!

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What is one of the most critical verses in all of Scripture when it comes to the welfare of the souls of men? What is a disposition toward our neighbors that we should seek to cultivate?
2. What does it mean to call upon the Name of the Lord? Do you ever feel like you are not getting what you want from God? How do you respond to that? What is necessary for one to call on the Name of the Lord?
3. What is the ordinary means by which one comes to believe? What is the difference between the outward call and the effectual call?
4. What does it mean to be sent? What are the various ways this happens? Do you see ways in which Christians or the church can improve in this area?
5. How can Christians have beautiful feet? Is the gospel good news to you? Explain.

Romans 10:16

Who Has Believed Our Report?

August 16, 2015

But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our report” (Romans 10:16-21)?

Introduction

The following quote is generally (although highly questionably) attributed to Albert Einstein: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.” That may very well be true in a scientific sense. If combining two similar amounts of a certain chemical results in an explosion, it would be rather silly to assume that a reenactment of the exact same procedure will, somehow, not result in another explosion. Beyond this, the definition may not be terribly useful or accurate.

In a clinical sense, *insanity*—if the term is even used any longer—is much more complex. The phrase may be even less valuable when used in a sociological sense. For example, arguments are often made both for and against the use of guns via some isolated act, practice or policy. It will be pointed out that policemen don’t carry guns in England and there are less gun related deaths—end of argument. Yet others will observe that cities in America with the loosest gun laws have the least amount of crime—end of argument.

But we all realize (or at least we should) that it is much more complicated than this. The two above examples may be a valuable part of the discussion, but are there not scores of other factors (poverty levels, crimes in general, violent influences, drug and alcohol, cultural icons and trends, use of guns in particular cities, etc.) that need to be considered? All this to say, to simplistically employ the above definition of insanity in a sociological sense may be quite useless. I for one would not be all that excited about experimenting with taking all guns away from policemen in 21st century Los Angeles.

Now, perhaps we can take it a step further. If the definition of insanity is not psychologically accurate or sociologically helpful, how devastating can be it when we seek to make use of it in terms of

spiritual matters? In the passage under our current meditations, we see the prophet, as it were, complaining—“**Lord, who has believed our report (literally, “the hearing of us” or “what they have heard from us”)?**” Would he dare even think to himself, ‘it’s not working...we must find a new report...maybe we should say something different...would it not be insane Lord to say the same thing yet expect a different result’?

The only insanity here would be in seeking to improve the message in order to encourage a more impressive response. It reminds me of a Bazooka Bubble Gum cartoon strip I read as a child where a man is under a street light looking for a lost ring. His friend asks where he lost it, and he said, “Down the block.” Confused, the friend asked, “Why are you looking for it here?” to which he responded, “Because the light is better here.”

Yet here is the great temptation for the church: to have everything well-lit but nothing to find. We are tempted to tweak the message rather than engage in the insane repetition of the “old paths” (Jeremiah 6:16). The message may be clear, winsome and attractive, but not redemptive. The venue may be full of people but bereft of the Spirit of God. What would we find if we inventoried our own hearts? Why have we come to church? What is our spiritual quest? Is it to have our barns full, our marriages strong, to be centered in our thinking and balanced in our psyches?

I happen to be one that believes the Christian faith addresses all these things and more. I do believe that, in the final analysis, the proper living out of the Christian faith will yield the best world that fallen man is capable of living in. Also, let me be quick to point out that the centrality of the church’s message should not serve as an excuse to exercise lethargy in secondary things. Preaching the full counsel of God means we touch on every area of life, and the church should be a warm, loving and engaging institution. Yet at the same time Jesus taught that whatever joyful families and lands may come in the advancement of His kingdom would be attended by persecutions—where the first will be last and the last first (Mark 10:29-31).

The road to happy families, according to Christ, may be families torn asunder due to their commitment to Him (Matthew 10:34-37). We must be careful to recognize that the path to true victory may very well be laden with pain, heartache and grief. It is a

method of the enemy to casually offer us what we all want if we will simply bow to him (Matthew 4:9). And the enemy is crafty. He will not suggest the plopping of unseemly provocative photos in the church's multi-media presentations. That would be too obvious (perhaps). No, it is a simple, subtle changing of the emphasis. We must have a church that works. Marriage and family, interpersonal relationships, proper Christian budgeting, marketing—these will be sure signs that God is at work and our church is succeeding.

The Apostle Paul had just given a series of rhetorical questions in reverse order to convey the means by which the eyes of the lost are opened. Salvation comes to those who call on the name of the Lord—calling comes through believing—believing comes through hearing—hearing comes through a sent preacher. What we learn here is that though these things are necessary for salvation, they are not, of themselves, sufficient to save.

What Paul will labor in this and the next chapter to show is that the lion's share of God's covenant people opted for pagan gods. But that did not mean that God had not kept His promise or that there was something wrong with the message—we must keep in mind that Paul is referring to that Old Covenant era in which there were direct prophetic utterances addressing the specific shortcomings of God's people. The message was quite clear. One of the possibilities, in terms of delivering a message that God has called the church to deliver, is revealed in verse 16.

But they have not all obeyed the gospel (Romans 10:16a).

Obey the Gospel?

It is very possible that the message is clear and accurate to God's word, but people choose not to obey. **Gospel** *evangelio* means good news. How does one go about **obeying** *hypekousan* (literally, to put yourself under what you hear) good news? The parallel Paul uses in this very verse compares “**obey**” to “**believe**”. All this to say, a person professing to believe, yet unwilling to obey, is a “**double-minded man**” who “**must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord**” (James 1:7, 8). The unprofitable servant (Luke 17:10) may be **unprofitable** (*achreioi*—unworthy or

undeserving of praise), but he is still a servant nonetheless. You cannot serve...

...two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other (Matthew 6:24).

There is a doctrine which flows in and out of the church from time to time suggesting that one can have Jesus as Savior but not as Lord or Master. According to Christ's own definition, this means that a person would embrace Him as Savior, while at the same time hate and despise Him as Master.

The Father has kept His promise by sending His Son as Prophet and Priest. But if He is not also our King, then He becomes (for us) none of the above. And then we see the complaint.

For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our report” (Romans 16b)?

Who Has Believed?

There may not be more appropriate and encouraging words for the western evangelical (or Protestant, Reformed—whatever you wish to call it) pastor than these. One is hard-pressed to find a growing, vibrant, flourishing church without chandeliers of heresy hanging from the rafters; so one might share a glorious commiseration with the prophet.

During our vacation, our family went to a small church where the pastor gave a sound and edifying gospel message. Our family made up half the congregation! Yet this young pastor seemed undaunted. He enthusiastically said what needed to be said. I could not help assume the pleasure of God at the sight of this little church.

I was reminded of a conversation with our elder, David Kennard, and how we were a bit vexed by the question, “How is the church doing?” There are any number of answers to that question, depending on what you want to know—attendance, finances, physical and moral health of the congregation, etc. But in the final analysis, David's answer spoke well to the question of the faithful church—“It is what it is.”

God is a faithful God. And even if we are not faithful, He will continue to be faithful (2 Timothy 2:13). We finish with a brief look at the passage in Isaiah—the passage where the prophet submits a holy complaint.

The immediate context of Paul's quotation from Isaiah has to do with their deliverance from Babylon. He had earlier quoted Isaiah 52:7, **“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who bring good news.”** It would not merely be deliverance from slavery, but worldwide salvation, that was promised—**“And all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of the Lord” (Isaiah 52:10).** He writes of the **“exalted and extolled...Servant” (Isaiah 52:13).** **“He shall sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at Him; for what had not been told them they shall see, and what they had not heard they shall consider” (Isaiah 52:15).**

Such great promises concerning the grace of God subduing and redeeming followed by the complaint:

Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed (Isaiah 53:1)?

At first blush there appears to be a conflict between the victory and failure of the gospel. But there is no true conflict. It was always the plan of God that He would redeem through the suffering Servant those disciples who would be willing to suffer as servants.

And we must not think it insane to repeat the truth—even if that truth be despised by all men. We must rather trust that God will reveal His arm according to His pleasure. Jesus quoted the same passage in order that we might understand God's prerogative to reveal and to blind (John 12:38-40).

Perhaps we can offer our own holy complaint before God. What we must not do is offer an inferior message to men, trusting the God will reveal His arm. Churches of all places must deliver the truth—despite the prevailing winds.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How is Einstein's definition of insanity helpful or unhelpful?
2. What is the great temptation when it comes to the church when it comes to observable productivity?
3. Does the Christian faith address families, marriages, business, etc? Does this mean immediate success in all these areas? How can Satan tempt the church in these things? Explain.
4. What is one of the possible responses to the gospel?
5. What does it mean to obey the gospel?
6. What is the holy complaint issued by the prophet? Will the gospel have worldwide impact? Then, why the complaint?
7. What must the church continue to do?

Romans 10:17

Hearing through the Word

August 23, 2015

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17).

Introduction

I am fond of pointing out that the public junior high school both my sisters attended in Hermosa Beach has Proverbs 29:18 carved into its exterior walls: **“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”** Though it is no longer a school, the building with the inscription exists to this very day. Yet the translation they chose is an unfortunate one and can easily be misleading, as if to say we need dreamers or that a nation devoid of Elon Musks will rapidly expire.

But the Hebrew language in which this Proverb was originally written allows for no such translation. The word **“vision”** *hazon* is more properly understood as a divine vision—a communication from God—a prophetic vision. Many good translations will take that into account. For example, the ESV renders **“Where there is no prophetic vision...”** the NKJV **“Where there is no revelation...”** In today’s nomenclature, ‘Where there is no Holy Scripture.’

Even the word **“perish”** *yippara* can be more accurately and thoroughly understood by the phrase (used in other translations) **“cast off restraint.”** Think of letting loose the reins or unbridled. It is used in Exodus 32:25 to describe “a mob or group hav(ing) no restraint in activities, implying open defiance of a known standard or authority.”³⁰

The casting off of restraint—it is what many children want and just the opposite of what they need. I’ve come to observe a practice people have of seeking to purge authority figures from their lives that it might be easier to engage in a behavior they know will not be approved of by those who love and care for them. We can speak

³⁰ Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

all we want of liberty, freedom, choice—we can bemoan the oppressive and heavy hand of a deity seeking to quell our progression as enlightened persons. But when it gets right down to it, we, according to our natures, prefer to **“break the bonds...and cast away (God’s) cords from us” (Psalm 2:3).**

And the worst thing that can happen is when God allows us the very thing we desire—to extract His prophetic vision. In the fourth chapter of Hosea we read of a season where there was **“no knowledge of God in the land” (Hosea 4:1).** Attending this period we read of increased levels of **“swearing, lying, murder, stealing...adultery...they break all bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed...therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish” (Hosea 4:2, 3).**

The passage culminates with an explanation accompanied by the promise of a terrible sanction:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children (Hosea 4:6).

Amos also gives a sober warning:

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “when I will send a famine on the land— not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11).

I daresay we’ve seen in our time increased levels of both the disease and its symptoms—that is to say, a lack of a true biblical grasp of the Triune God has resulted in a series of political, social/familial and ecclesiastical moral catastrophes. It has been said, in a sort of divine irony:

God often makes people's sin their punishment. A man needs no greater plague than to be left to the impetuous rage of his own lusts.³¹

And as the Apostle Paul has labored to demonstrate, though the truth may not be sufficient to restore, it is necessary. People need to hear the word of God.

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17).

The Righteousness of God

We must be clear here that the Apostle is not merely addressing political, social or ecclesiastical ethics. We are catching him in the middle of a conversation that began with his intense desire to see his fellow Israelite (a people zealous for God, but ignorant of the way of salvation) embrace the salvation found in Christ. He wants us to know that we should not seek to establish our own righteousness, but believe unto righteousness (Romans 10:3, 10).

Paul then gives a series of rhetorical questions in reverse order that we may know the means by which souls are saved. **“Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”** But calling presupposes believing, and believing comes through hearing, hearing through preaching, and preaching through sending.

The Word of God

He sums it up in this verse—**faith** (belief) *pistis* comes by **hearing** *akoes*. But it is not as if the preacher can just preach anything—it must be the **“word of God”** *rhēmatos theou*. Whereas **“word”** *logos* may denote a concept or even refer to Christ Himself, here *rhēmatos* generally speaks of actual words. God is the giver of faith, but the means by which He does this is through words that He has determined the preacher ought to say.

Of course, it is not merely words, but the ideas or propositions that these words form. And it would appear that the central idea, the

³¹ Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (p. 2221). Peabody: Hendrickson.

primary proposition (one that the writers of Scripture seldom stray from—one example being Romans 10:9) is that the Lord Jesus died and rose again to save sinners. When the preacher leaves that, he, as it were, strolls away from the pantry of true food. And we should pray that he/we are reminded by our own hunger where that food is and stay near it.

The Primary Task

There is a temptation when one has been in the ministry many years to merely read the verse, sing the song, pray the prayer and convey the words of institution. What I seek to do myself, and encourage others who lead worship to do, is stop for a moment and consider with a renewed joy or fear (or whatever the particular message might convey) that which we are engaged in. We're not merely leading worship; we're *worshiping*.

All this to say, it is the primary task of the church and its ministers (and at some level this includes us all) to be that institution which transports the word of God from generation to generation. It is not book publishers, not radio station managers, not television producers or even para-church organizations. We are here and support the church with our time, efforts, gifts and finances—that the church might, through word and sacrament, house and convey **“the oracles (*logia*—sayings) of God” (Romans 3:2).**

The Power of the Word

There is a great underestimation of the power of the word. Not too many years ago, I met with a woman who was a minister to discuss a certain matter. She was a nice lady, and very liberal. During our meeting, we discussed what we had been preaching through. She (it appeared almost for shock value) told me she was preaching through a sociological periodical which addressed the need to feel as if one were part of a family. This may be an extreme example of one who has departed from **“the word of God” *rhēmatos theou***, but it is becoming much more common.

I compare this to the time (over 30 years ago) when I lost my Bible. A number of years had gone by and I was working as a youth minister when the office manager called me and told me I had a

visitor. A lady walked in who I did not recognize and she was holding an old Bible. She said she found it on the curb (a curb where I was in the habit of parking—I apparently set it down and drove away).

She brought it home and put it on a bookshelf. Many months passed and she, perhaps out of boredom, picked it up and began to read. I don't know what portion she read, but it was enough to motivate her to go to church. Somewhere between the reading and the going to church she came to faith. The Bible was dog-eared and weather beaten. It had two sets of notes in it, hers and mine. It also had my name, address and phone number. She felt guilty that she had never returned it and was seeking to close the chapter on that little bit of negligence. I, of course, had purchased a new Bible by then and encouraged her to keep the Bible, the word of God, which was the instrument by which God had granted her life. Sometimes a Bible on a curb is more powerful than many sermons in grand cathedrals.

Thomas Aquinas once visited Pope Innocent II in the 13th century during the height of Rome's conquests and riches. The Pope in his regal splendor boasted, "You see Thomas, the church can no longer say (as Peter said in Acts 3:6), silver and gold I have none." Aquinas replied, "True, holy father, but neither can she now say, 'Rise and walk.'"

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Proverbs 29:18 reads, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” How might certain people understand that? What does this proverb mean?
2. What do you see happening today which may be examples of a lack of the knowledge of God? What are some consequences or results of this? Discuss the quote from Matthew Henry.
3. What was the Apostle Paul’s intense desire? What was the error of his fellow Israelite? Can you think of anyone you feel that way about? What have you done about it?
4. What must be heard in order for God to grant faith? Be specific.
5. What is the primary task of the church? Do you see this task be overtaken by others? Discuss.
6. In what ways do people underestimate the power of the word of God? What are the consequences of this?

Romans 10:18-19

All the Earth—The Ends of the World

August 30, 2015

But I say, have they not heard? Yes indeed: “*Their sound has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.*” But I say, did Israel not know? First Moses says: “*I will provoke you to jealousy by those who are not a nation, I will move you to anger by a foolish nation*” (Romans 10:18-19).

Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and theologian who was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo as an anti-Nazi dissident in 1943. During his time in prison he continued his ministerial pursuits with other prisoners and even those who were commissioned to guard him. He was eventually accused of conspiring to assassinate Adolf Hitler and was hanged just two weeks prior to the end of the war.

Like many pastors and theologians, he had his doctrinal strengths and weaknesses. But one of his most profound quotations, in my mind, is found in his book *Life Together*, a book he wrote while teaching in an underground seminary. He makes this startling observation:

God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren.

This observation was not something new when Bonhoeffer made it. Nor has it gone away. Christians, and the communities they construct, develop expectations. Whether we want to call it a vision

or a dream or even a hope—these expectations bubble to the top. They become our unspoken (or even spoken) mission statements. We develop our ideas of what the faithful individual Christian, Christian community (or church) or Christian culture should be. And our individual success, our collective success and even God’s success is evaluated based upon those expectations being met.

I am not against reasonable expectations. If I plan out a regimen of diet and exercise I will expect to be healthier. Even in our spiritual pursuits, if we plan out my spiritual disciplines (prayer, study, church, and fellowship) I expect greater intimacy in my grasp of God’s love and grace—greater peace in my heart.

The problem is when you live in a religious culture that has taken a foul turn, a culture that begins to read in the Bible things which are not there and not see things which are. We live in a religious environment, for example, where the primary (if not sole) purpose of many evangelistic ministries is to encourage the asking of Jesus into the heart—an action one is hard-pressed to find contained in any of the sixty-six books of Holy Scripture. Conversely, church membership and the sacraments (primary biblical imperatives) have become an expendable afterthought.

Jesus was born into a community such as this.

He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition” (Matthew 15:3)?

The Apostle Paul found himself contending with this mentality. They had not abandoned religion. They had not even abandoned the true religion. What they had abandoned was the truth contained in the true religion. Their religion had become inconvenient, uncomfortable, the biggest inconvenience being Christ Himself (1 Corinthians 1:23—a “stumbling block”). So the easiest thing to do when that happens is willfully ignore those portions of Scripture. Portions of the Scripture became a black sheep; like that cousin you hope won’t show up and embarrass you at the family function. We don’t mention those verses in parties.

The Word Has Not Failed

The line of reasoning of which today's passage is in the midst is a sort of apologetic (a defense) for the word of God. It is most clearly seen in Roman 9:6 where Paul explains that **“it is not that the word of God has taken no effect—(or failed *ekpeptoken*³²).”** The problem, it would appear, was that God had made promises to Israel as a nation that now seemed to be showered upon the church.

Israel had been promised the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27), a future resurrection (Ezekiel 37), the sonship of God (Exodus 4:22), and an inheritance that was promised to Israel (Isaiah 60). Israel was God's chosen people whom He would never forsake (Amos 3:2, Deuteronomy 31:6).

Yet in one chapter, the Apostle places all of these promises in the bosom of the church (Romans 8:4, 10-11, 14-17, 29-30, 39). There is a feeling of great power in a community. How much more so in the covenant community—the community which were the recipients of the great promises of God! But we are not saved by our mere inclusion in a community. That was a terrible mistake made by Paul's fellow countrymen. We are children of God by virtue of God making and keeping a promise.

That is, those who *are* the children of the flesh, these *are* not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed (Romans 9:8).

That is the way it is now and that is how it has always been, even in the Old Covenant, which almost made it appear that children were regenerate (born again) at conception. Whether it was Isaac and Ishmael or Jacob and Esau—the child of God was the child of promise—and that promise evidenced itself by faith in Christ. Paul had just taught that the means by which that faith would come is the preaching and hearing of the word (Romans 10:13-17).

We must seek to avoid the *cultus* mentality of exclusionary thinking. The 'we four, no more, shut the door' heart of an elitist is a flag set in opposition to the Great Commission of the living Christ who, because of His obedient living, suffering, dying and resurrection

³² To fall...to become inadequate for some function.

was granted all authority in heaven and on earth—a banner under which eternal peace is to be heralded to every nation, kindred and tongue. If one is looking for a mission statement, one is hard-pressed to find a better one than the Great Commission. It is the fulfillment of that which provokes the heavenly host to sing:

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9).

But I say, have they not heard? Yes indeed: “*Their sound has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world*” (Romans 10:18).

The Universal Church

Though an Apostle of God, speaking the word of God, Paul makes his argument from Scripture. He will show them what they had conveniently missed when reading their Bibles. He begins with an allusion to Psalm 19:4, which is a testimony to the universal nature of general revelation (that which every person knows by virtue of observing creation)—“**the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork**” Psalm 19:1).

What we are to be persuaded of is that, in the same way the heavens make a universal declaration of the handiwork of God, the gospel (to a certain extent, it already had been—Romans 1:8) is to be universally declared. *Would these people read the Scriptures in such a way as to acknowledge that God has universally declared that He is, without universally declaring that He saves?*

I recall watching a comedian who had at one time been in the ministry. He had abandoned his faith and (I say this sadly—in hopes that he repented before he died) had become a horribly evil person, using his high profile platform to ridicule and blaspheme (I came to the point when I had to stop watching him). He would make fun of evangelistic efforts to “tell people about Jesus.” He would say, “I think they already know.” There was a certain amount of truth in that criticism—having been raised in an evangelized nation. But it seems

now that even though people might know the name Jesus, not one in ten can give an accurate definition of who He is or what He has done.

As he continues his defense of the word of God and the events that had recently transpired (the calling of the gentiles), Paul quotes from the Torah (Deuteronomy 32:21).

But I say, did Israel not know? First Moses says: “*I will provoke you to jealousy by those who are not a nation, I will move you to anger by a foolish nation*” (Romans 10:19).

Jealousy

Paul will now begin to explain how those who had so perverted what it meant to be in covenant with God (some, but not all, of Paul’s fellow countrymen—the Israelites) would respond to this universal inclusiveness. Deuteronomy 32:21 indicates that they had made God jealous with their idolatry and now He would make them jealous by taking those who are a foolish nation (making them not a nation at all) and make them the object of His saving affections.

Of course, our natural reaction might be to ask “Isn’t jealousy bad?” Perhaps the richest and most influential female television personality in America indicated that the teaching that God is a jealous God was what led her out of the church. But **jealousy** *parazelo* is not necessarily bad. Jealousy is not *envy*. Envy is wanting that which belongs to someone else; jealousy is the discomfort associated with somebody else taking that which belongs to you.

When God says He’s a “**jealous God**” (Exodus 20:5), He is not revealing some insecurity or dark side of His personality. He is indicating that those people who are His people and the objects of His love, protection, wisdom and riches are being seduced by that which can never and will never provide what He can or love the way He loves. Parents can feel this way when they see their children influenced by charlatans and fakes.

Jealousy can be accompanied by bad behavior. If in your own jealousy you become vindictive, you have taken a bad turn. But it is the vindictiveness which is bad, not the jealousy. People make the same mistake with competitiveness. They say someone is too competitive because they yell, scream and throw chairs. They’re not

too competitive; they just have a bad attitude and lose control of their passions.

What Paul seems to be saying here (and what he will continue to teach in chapter 11:11, 14) is that when His fellow Israelites see the joy, intimacy, fellowship and assurance that the gentiles enjoy as the objects of God's love and warmth, they will be moved to embrace that themselves. In this respect they are very similar to the prodigal at home—the brother who was dismayed at the warm reception his wayward brother had received at his repentance. All of this was taught in Scripture—the Scripture had not failed!

Conclusion

It was always the plan of God to cover the earth with His righteousness—to set right by Christ that which was undone by Adam—to take foolish nations (those which are not nations in any true sense) and make them His. One wonders if Paul had this in mind in his first letter to the church at Corinth:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:27-31).

Paul will continue to appeal to the text in his description of nature and disposition of those by whom Israel would be made jealous—a people not seeking Him or asking for Him. We will investigate this further next time.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What does it mean to be a visionary dreamer? How can this be good? How can this be bad?
2. In what ways was Jesus born into a community where their own religious expectations had become foul?
3. Can you think of portions of Scripture that our current Christian culture has ignored? Can you think of religious actions which are prominent but with no, or little, biblical basis?
4. Why did the Apostle Paul have to defend the word of God? What had his fellow countrymen failed to realize?
5. How far should the sound of the gospel go? How does this happen?
6. Is jealousy good or bad? What role would jealousy play according to the Apostle's teaching in this passage and in chapter 11?
7. What seems to be God's practice when it comes to glorifying Himself in this world?

Romans 10:20-21

Not Seeking, Yet Finding

September 6, 2015

But Isaiah is very bold and says: “*I was found by those who did not seek Me; I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me.*” But to Israel he says: “*All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and contrary people*” (Romans 10:20-21).

Introduction

We are in the midst of three of the most difficult and controversial chapters in all of Scripture (Romans 9 through 11). The Apostle is presenting profound observations that, depending on your vantage point, may anger, confuse or comfort the reader. He is making a defense for the veracity of Scripture, the sovereignty of God in election (and all the affairs of human history—Romans 9:17), the role of Israel in history, and perhaps even eschatology (the study of last things). He will even move into the issues of Christian and government (Romans 12-13).

He realizes how difficult his teaching is. He does not apologize for this, but will eventually burst forth in doxology:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways (Romans 11:33)!

But in the beginning, and again in the midst of his weighty discourse, Paul reminds his readers of his heart.

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake

of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3).

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved (Romans 10:1).

He believes his fellow countrymen (Israelites) are lost and under the influence of soul-crushing deception. He, no doubt, realizes that they may interpret this as error, heresy, contempt and even condescension on his part. And he was right. The book of Acts records how they sought to mistreat and stone him. Paul butted heads, and was in disfavor with both the religious and political community. But it was not contempt or condescension.

He had anguish in his heart—a heart which carried a great desire for the salvation of his fellow countrymen. These were people he knew, people he had been raised with and fellowshiped with and ate with. To a certain extent, I commiserate with that grief, having lived in one community all my life and interacting with people I have seen grow up. Many of these people I adamantly disagree with on many issues.

Perhaps some of you have observed our online discussions with Carl, Darren, John, Dillon and Sean (and others) and recoil at the depth of our disagreements. These are men (most in their forties) who I have known since they were kids. We grew up in the same community. And over and above all of the ancillary discussions there is a great desire to see redemption visit their hearts. These are people I have great affection for. I believe there is a heaven and a hell. And what should never be lost in this dialogue is the great desire to enjoy eternity with them.

God Has a Plan

We are often told that God has a plan, a statement more true than many people who utter those words realize. In chapters 9 through 11, the Apostle is explaining how that plan, especially as it speaks to the Jew/gentile issue, is unfolding. As discussed earlier, Paul is giving an apologetic for the Scriptures—**“It is not as though the word of God has failed” (Romans 9:6)**. What the Scriptures declared was going to happen was happening.

In short, Jesus would come to His own covenant people (Israel) who would, for the most part, reject Him. Then the message of redemption would be extended toward the whole world and people from every nation, kindred and tongue would enjoy the mercy, grace and peace offered through Christ's great love and sacrifice. The Jew would then see this and, being jealous of this great redemption, would themselves call on Christ. This is the metanarrative of these chapters. This is where we pick it up.

But Isaiah is very bold and says: “I was found by those who did not seek Me; I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me” (Romans 10:20).

The Not(s) of Redemption

Here we read of the character, the nature, the disposition of those who have somehow found favor with God.³³ Simply put, there was nothing about them (in terms of some virtue found in them) that set them apart. In this manner it was very similar to God's choosing of Israel to be His “**treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are the face of the earth...**”

...It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples (Deuteronomy 7:6, 7).

God seems very concerned about telling us what we don't bring to the table of redemption—the “nots” *ouk* of Scripture.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

...who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own

³³ From Isaiah 65:1, 2.

purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began (2 Timothy 2:9).

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12, 13).

So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy (Romans 9:16).

Nonetheless, human works and human will seem to work themselves into our theology. We feel like we just can't show up to the party of redemption without a bottle of wine. How true the line in the hymn Rock of Ages:

**Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to the cross I cling**

But even that does not tell the complete story. For not only would we have nothing to bring to the cross; apart from the grace of God we would not even come to the cross. According to our natures we would not cling to the cross. The cross would remain “**folly**” to us (1 Corinthians 1:18).

It is not woven into the nature of sinful men to **seek** *zetousin* after God. It is quite the contrary. We had earlier learned: “**There is none who seeks after God**” (Roman 3:11). Yet what we learn in this verse is that God will be found (from the verb *heurisko*—eureka—I found it) by those not seeking Him.

Seeking God

It all seems quite paradoxical, especially in light of the numerous passages in Scripture which call us to seek God—a seeking resulting in finding.

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near (Isaiah 55:6).

I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me (Proverbs 8:17).

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart (Jeremiah 29:12, 13).

But the answer is quite simple. We will seek to lay hold of God only after, and as a result of, Him seeking to lay hold of us. Paul, in his own testimony, explains:

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me (Philippians 3:12).

We will only seek to apprehend Christ after He has first sought (with certain efficiency) to apprehend us. It has been put forth, I believe, with great accuracy:

...but we are all, without exception, delivered by his free mercy from the deepest abyss of death, when there is no knowledge of him, no desire of serving him, in a word, no conviction of his truth.³⁴

Not only should this yield humility in our hearts and confidence that God has the power to bring, through His Spirit and gospel, salvation to the most hardened sinner, but it should be a matter of increased praise and love.

Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little (Luke 7:47).

Not to overly pontificate, but it may very well be that the current abysmal condition of evangelicalism in the west is a

³⁴ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 10:20). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

consequence of the presentation of a gospel which comingles the blood of Christ with the will, wisdom and virtue of man.

Yet at the same time it is a great mistake to assume from Romans 10:20 that Romans 10:21 does not carry the full impact of what it clearly states.

But to Israel he says: “*All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and contrary people*” (Romans 10:21).

Stretched Out Hands

All day long God stretches out His hands to a disobedient and contrary people. I am not generally prone to embrace that which is irrational. If something is contradictory or self-refuting it must be abandoned. For example, the great empirical mission “I only believe what I can see” is itself invisible and therefore is self-refuting and must be abandoned. The same can be said for so much of what, at first blush, appears reasonable but cannot survive deeper scrutiny.

But we must understand, in terms of the pursuit of that which is rational, that just because something is beyond our grasp does not make it irrational. Paul will acknowledge the “**unsearchable**” *anexerauneta* (that which is unfathomable to man) nature of God’s judgments (Romans 11:33). It is man’s efforts to reduce God, to bring Him into the boundaries of our comprehension (by *comprehension* I mean exhaustive, or complete knowledge), that errors and heresies surface.

Man’s inability to fathom the Trinity (a God that is at the same time one in substance and three in person), the hypostatic union (that Jesus is fully God and fully man), verbal plenary inspiration (that the Scriptures are written by hands of men but also by the Spirit of God) has yielded great errors. We fail to grasp that a full comprehension of God would require that we, ourselves be equal to God.

Herein lies one of the attributes that natural men (and even some regenerate men) refuse to suffer: That God is fully sovereign in election, yet man is fully accountable in his knowledge of and response to God. We are without excuse (Romans 1:20). This is true of all people, but how much more those who count themselves the people of God, “**to Israel He says...**”

And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer (Jeremiah 7:13).

The stretching out of His hands is emphatic...like a father widening his arms to a recalcitrant child (Proverbs 1:24). **“All day long”** to highlight God’s loving and prolonged appeal. Yet they were **“disobedient”** *apeithounta* and their disobedience is naturally accompanied by a **“contrary”** disposition—*antlegonta*—literally meaning to speak against. Disobedience has a way of justifying itself through argumentation. And they were arguing against their only hope. It’s been said:

So long as the Jews “sought to set up their own righteousness,” it was in the nature of things impossible that they should “submit themselves to the righteousness of God”; the one of these two methods of acceptance being in the teeth of the other (Ro 10:3).³⁵

It is a sort of spiritual insanity which refuses to abandon the sin tainted and perverted righteousness in order to gain that free gift of righteousness...**“that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Philippians 3:9).**

These strong words of reproof are given to the Old Testament covenant people of God—Israel. But Paul is quick to warn the New Testament covenant people of God not to be **“haughty, for if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either” (Romans 11:20, 21).**

In a church likes ours I feel as if many of us have been both—the ones grafted in (new believers) yet now a second or third generation of those raised in the church. Let us ever consider the words of Paul in the next chapter:

³⁵ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Vol. 2, p. 248). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in *His* goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off (Romans 11:22).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What should the deep teachings in Scripture produce in our hearts?
2. In the Apostle's teaching in Romans 9 through 11, what was his underlying sorrow?
3. In your disagreements with people, do you find it difficult to maintain the proper disposition? What is your ultimate desire for your fellow man/woman?
4. What is the metanarrative in Romans chapters 9 through 11?
5. What is it God wants us to know about what we don't bring to redemption?
6. Have you heard the gospel presented in such a way as to mix, or comingle, the grace of God with the will, or virtue of man? Explain. Why is this harmful?
7. What does it mean that God "stretches out His hands"? Does the sovereignty of God lessen human accountability before God? Explain.
8. How have you responded to the outstretched hands of God?

Romans 11:1-6

Cast Away? – Part I

October 11, 2015

I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, “*Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life*”? But what does the divine response say to him? “*I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.*” Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then *it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work* (Romans 11:1-6).

I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin (Roman 11:1).

Cast Away His People?

The Christian Post reported on October 7th that Eva Brunne, the world's first openly lesbian bishop, has called for a church in Stockholm, Sweden to remove all signs of the cross, and to instead build an Islamic prayer room in order to welcome Muslims.

I don't mean to sound overly austere, judgmental or inhospitable, but it certainly seems that this church has crossed the Rubicon when it comes to apostasy. It should grieve our hearts that the inevitable outcome of churches such as these is the production of those of whom Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount:

Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not

prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’ (Matthew 7:21-23)!

Would such a heartbreaking encounter mean that God has cast away His people? **“Cast away”** *apostato* means to push away or to reject. Apostasy (something men do) means to turn your back on your faith. So are we to assume that when a person engages in apostasy that God has **“cast away”** *apostato* one of His own?

To address such a thought, the Apostle Paul brings forth one of his strongest denunciations, *me genoito* **“certainly not!”** or **“by no means!”** or **“may it never be!”** It is quite impossible for God to deny those upon whom He has set His covenantal love.

For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage (Psalm 94:14).

Yet in a way very similar to apostate churches today, the true church, by the time of Christ’s birth, had abandoned the truth faith; the root problem being an empty, heartless pursuit of their faith. Jesus addressed the cause of their impending crisis:

This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men (Matthew 15:8, 9).

The inevitable conclusion of the supplanting of God’s word with the commandments of men is a vanity (meaninglessness) in worship. And though God is a patient God, He will not suffer His church to continue its slide into corruption—the church must repent or it will no longer be a church. This was a massive problem in the transition from the Old Covenant into the New Covenant—rendering the Old Covenant obsolete and **“ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:13).**

When the church descends to a denial of Christ’s word, it is questioning and denying His very authority—something we see in

Matthew 21:23 in the question asked by the religious leaders: **“By what authority...?”** This encounter (after some instruction in parables) culminates with Jesus’ proclamation regarding who would serve as God’s New Covenant institution:

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits (Matthew 21:43).

Such a transition caused people to question the very faithfulness of God! Had God not made promises to Israel? Has God not made promises to His church? So if you were an Israelite, how could it be that you find yourself cast off—as Paul had earlier taught: **“Israel has not attained the law of righteousness” (Romans 9:30).** If one were a member of this church in Sweden or some other apostate church, would we conclude that God had cast off His people? It was Paul’s heartfelt desire that they be saved (Romans 10:1), which necessarily assumes that they were in a condition of unregenerate darkness. Does God cast away His people? What is the answer to this dilemma?

For I Am an Israelite

Paul answers the apparent difficulty by appealing to Himself. He brings forth his own resumé, his highly esteemed religious pedigree: **“For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.”** This topic was more highly elaborated in his epistle to the Philippians.

...though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless (Philippians 3:4-6).

These would have been very impressive credentials. What resumé would we bring forth as an expression of the legitimacy our faith? So often in our insecurities we are tempted to leak out some mention of our good works or religious post or accomplishment in order to gain a feeling of authenticity.

But what Apostle Paul brings forth in his presentation of what grants him assurance before God is an abject denial of everything he is (in terms of Hebrew heritage) and everything he has done (in terms of the aforementioned obedience).

...But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:7-9).

God has not cast away His people. Simply stated, though one's religious identity (in this case, as a Hebrew) doesn't approve a person before God, neither does it disqualify a person. When it gets right down to it, it is simply a non-issue.

A question is often asked (not merely in relation to Judaism): "Do people go to hell because they're Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, atheists, agnostics, etc?" The answer is 'no'. People go to hell because they're sinners; because a righteous God cannot remain just and ignore the sins of the world. He is a God of **"purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong"** (Habakkuk 1:13).

And there can be no true unity with God apart from those sins being atoned for—to expiate or **make propitiation *hilasmos***. Things need to be made right. Many people go through life content with a bad relationship going unaddressed; not so with God. Either Christ will pay for our sins or we will. Either way, justice will not be ignored.

So often we quote 1 John 1:9 without considering a word John inserts which amplifies the depth of the verse.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just (*dikaios*) to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

How is it that God remains just while He forgives sins? Because the price has been paid! Jesus gave Himself as a ransom. In short, the indictment against humanity is not one of being a Hebrew (or any other religious conviction—other than false religious convictions themselves containing idolatrous components). The universal disease of the human race, which is only addressed by the atoning blood of Christ, is the pandemic disease of sin.

But He *was* wounded for our transgressions, He *was* bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:5).

So the question remains, if being part of a religious community (even a religious community which God identifies as His own, like the Israelites or even the church) does not warrant the comfort of assurance as a true child of God, enabling one to say with certainty that we are one of “His people”, *where are we to find our comfort?*

Who are the people that God has not cast away—the true people of His promise?

God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew (Romans 11:2a).

Whom He Foreknew

Many believers fail to gravitate in this direction when it comes to the consoling of our own hearts when doubts and difficulties arise, but Paul argues both for the faithfulness of God and the peace of our own souls by appealing to the most intimate of relational attributes—that God’s people are those “**He foreknew**” or “**He knew before**” *proegno* from the verb *proginosko*.

It is upon this rock-solid foreknowledge of God that Christians are to plant their flags of hope. The same word is used amidst Paul's focus of our comfort toward the end of Romans 8:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose. For whom He foreknew (*proegno*), He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).

We must keep in mind that foreknowledge is not mere foresight. It is “**for whom (*hous*) He foreknew**” not “**for what (*tis*) He foreknew.**” This is necessarily understood both in the context of the Romans 8 passage as well as Romans 11 where Paul, in verse 5 will write of “**the election of grace.**”

God may have chosen communities (Israel or the church) as institutions to manifest His glory, but He foreknew people. Let us be clear, for God to claim knowledge of a person in this sense contains the fullness of love, acceptance, adoption and glory. Jesus uses the same word in the opposite sense in a passage we referred to earlier: “**I never knew (*egnon*) you.**”

One might ask, “How do I know I am one known by God from eternity past?” The evidence of this is, no doubt, found in human convictions—If I love God, it must be a result of Him loving me first (1 John 4:9); if I chose Jesus it must be due to Him first choosing me (John 15:16). These things, including His very fatherhood revealed to our spirit by His Spirit (Romans 8:16).

But the great Christian confidence does not lie in the evidence of our convictions. No, Paul appeals to the foreknowledge of God. Over and above our profession of knowing Him is His profession of knowing us.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What is apostasy and how do we know when/if that has happened?
2. What is the sorrowful production of apostasy?
3. When does worship becoming vain or meaningless?
4. What was the condition of the church when Jesus was born? To whom was the kingdom of God entrusted?
5. If God does not cast away His people, how are we to understand His relationship to Israel?
6. Do people go to hell because they follow false religions? Explain.
7. How is God “just” when He forgives sins?
8. What does it mean to be “foreknown” by God and why is this put forth as a source of comfort?

Romans 11:1-6

Reserved for Myself – Part II

October 18, 2015

I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, “*Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life*”? But what does the divine response say to him? “*I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.*” Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then *it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work (Romans 11:1-6).*

Review

The Apostle Paul is answering the objection that God has somehow not kept His word, that He would be faithful to the promises made to Israel. This objection comes to the fore in a very pointed way we observe one of the most glorious and gracious chapters in the entire New Testament—Romans 8.

- Israel was promised the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27), but in Romans 8:4 this promise is fulfilled in the church.
- Israel had been promised a future resurrection (Ezekiel 37), but Paul tells the church God, who raised Christ will give life to your mortal bodies (Romans 8:10-11).
- Israel was God’s son (Exodus 4:22); now believers in Christ are sons and daughters (Romans 8:14-17).

- An inheritance was promised to Israel (Isaiah 60), but now the believer is the “joint heir” with Christ (Romans 8:17).
- Israel was God’s chosen people (Amos 3:2), but Paul aims this blessed designation to those who have faith in Christ (Roman 8:29-30).
- God had promised never to forsake Israel (Deuteronomy 31:6), but it is the church—the believer—who can have the assurance that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:39).

Romans chapters 9 through 11 are Paul’s treatise on the faithfulness of God. And all those sub-topics (sovereignty, election, prophecy) that Paul offers in this excursion become the mortar on which our comfort and God’s honor and glory are built.

A critical element in understanding our Bibles correctly is grasping the distinction between how God addresses people corporately versus how He addresses people individually.

For example, the Apostle Paul refers to the church at Corinth as **“those sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 1:2)**, yet just four chapters later he instructs them to deliver a member of the church **“to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:5)**. It does not appear that that person was, as an individual, sanctified in Christ.

Peter writes to those **“who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1)**, but in the very next chapter he warns of **“false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies” (2 Peter 2:1)**. It seems one must conclude that those false teachers, as individuals, did not have a faith of equal standing.

As important as it is to be part of the corporate people of God, one should not think that inclusion in the corporate designation of those sanctified and faithful means that one’s soul, as an individual, is right with God.

This distinction is often referred to as the visible or invisible church; or to put it in simple biblical words, **“For they are not all**

Israel who of Israel” (Romans 9:6). Paul continues making this distinction as chapter 11 begins by strenuously arguing that God has not **“cast away His people” (Romans 11:1).** If they have been cast away, they are not, and never were, His (1 John 2:19). They may have been part of a community, made up primarily (or maybe not primarily) of those who are faithful to the convictions of that community—but their faithfulness was, as Jesus put it, mere lip-service and not from the heart (Matthew 15:8, 9).

As we learned in our last meeting, the Israelite was not, by virtue of his ethnicity, excluded from the covenant blessings of God. Paul himself enjoyed the fullness of God’s grace and was of the Seed of Abraham and the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1). But that was not his testimony of peace with God—it was quite the opposite. This was a testimony of everything Paul denied in order that he might be found in Christ...

...not having (his) own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:9).

In order to establish the faithfulness of God and the comfort and assurance of his readers (and of himself) Paul appeals to something even prior to faith—he appeals to the foreknowledge of God (Romans 11:2a). As discussed last time, this is not mere foresight but foreknowledge. That is to say that it wasn’t *something* God knew but *someone* God knew. He knew His own from eternity past—**“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4).**

Now, the Apostle will bring to light that this distinction between visible and invisible—between mere outward inclusion and true faithfulness—is nothing new. He makes a biblical argument:

Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, “*Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life*”? But what does the divine response say to him? “*I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal*” (Romans 11:2b-4).

I would like to make just two points that we see jump out in these verses: First, how we have to be careful in our counting; second, how the faithless are marked out by an observable act.

Careful in our Counting

Elijah's complaint is based upon what appeared to him to be a complete, utter and aggressive departure from the truth—and this apostasy was performed by those who were said to be the apple of God's eye (Deuteronomy 32:10; Psalm 17:8; Zechariah 2:8).

The people of God were killing prophets, tearing down altars and forsaking the covenant (1 Kings 19:10). Elijah's own life was very much in danger. We see a similar dismal assessment in Psalm 12:

Save, O Lord, for the godly one is gone; for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man. Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak (Psalm 12:1).

This can result in a disposition commonly referred to as an Elijah Complex—"I and I alone am left to serve the Lord"—which can easily lead to pride. It is a source of concern that we live in a culture of Christians so quick to trumpet our own faithfulness. It is a cryptic trap.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt (Luke 18:9).

Nonetheless, Elijah receives a divine response that God has things well in hand. The Almighty has "**reserved for (Himself)**" *katelipon emauto* a remnant (7000—likely not an exact number but a full and complete number). The language here indicates that it is God's decisive action which is the source of the faithful remnant. It would be like me finding a quarter, then complaining that I'm the only one with any money only to find that God has an entire treasury of quarters that I just haven't seen. It has been said:

Let it also be remembered by us, that they are foolish and presumptuous who calculate the number of the elect according to the extent of their own perception: for God has a way, easy to himself, hidden from us, by which he wonderfully preserves his elect, even when all things seem to us past all remedy.³⁶

And again:

Since then the grace of God prevails so much in an extreme state of things, let us not lightly give over to the devil all those whose piety does not openly appear to us.³⁷

We can so easily be mistaken when it comes to numbering the true church—the faithful remnant. Some churches have sold their souls to fill their temples and boast that God is at work. Others so utterly despise the idea of church growth and cultural interaction that they have unwittingly committed themselves to evangelistic insignificance.

In a week our church is conducting a conference on *Christ and Culture*. Many of us bemoan (and rightfully so) how benign the church has become and the consequent systematic dismantling of things good and godly in our land. Yet we must be careful not to measure God's success by our own outward observation. It was a mistake made by Elijah, made by Paul's contemporaries, and it is, little doubt, made today.

It is a not-so-slight plague of western hubris to measure kingdom advancement by calculations limited from New York to Los Angeles. An earthquake kills 20,000 in India and we watch in sorrow and seek to provide aid, but any tremor in California is accompanied by yet another prediction of the Second Coming.

God may have an entirely different plan as to how He will accomplish bringing the “ends of the world...and all the families of the nations” to worship Him (Psalm 22:27).

³⁶ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 11:2). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

³⁷ Ibid.

I find the prognostication of Fenggang Yang, a professor of sociology at Purdue, to be quite encouraging.

By my calculations China is destined to become the largest Christian country in the world very soon.

The warrant for this is taken from the observation that...

...China's Protestant community, which had just one million members in 1949, has already overtaken those of countries more commonly associated with an evangelical boom. In 2010 there were more than 58 million Protestants in China... Prof Yang, a leading expert on religion in China, believes that number will swell to around 160 million by 2025. That would likely put China ahead even of the United States..."Mao thought he could eliminate religion. He thought he had accomplished this," Prof Yang said. "It's ironic – they didn't. They actually failed completely."

I mention this merely for us to recognize that these things which are happening before our eyes are not necessarily an appropriate or accurate rule by which to measure the accomplishments of a God who has His secret will and reserves for Himself that/those who are necessary for that will to come to pass.

This brings us to our final point—that there are observable things that God reveals which mark out who are His and who are not His.

But what does the divine response say to him? *"I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal"* (Romans 11:4).

Observable Apostasy

Faith, justification, adoption, regeneration (being born again) may all be invisible to the human eye, but the fruit of such glorious

immaterial truths becomes abundantly observable. We can say we love God. Love is invisible; who would know? Of course, God would. But Jesus would not have our love for Him remain some inert, invisible affection. It must transition into an observable act.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments (John 14:15).

Though man is saved by grace through faith according to the foreknowledge of God—God may very well mark out those who are not His by virtue of an observable act.

Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him (1 Kings 19:18).

Bowing knees and kissing idols may all sound very harmless. But such idolatry tills the ground of the corrupt human heart to descend to unthinkable atrocities.

And he defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech (2 Kings 23:10).

In the event in question...

...the ancients would heat this idol up with fire until it was glowing. Then they would take their newborn babies, place them on the arms of the idol, and watch them burn to death.

A week ago Thursday (October 8th) a group of clergy gathered outside a Cleveland abortion clinic to bless the facility. With the typical smokescreen of accusational language of shame and hate, they donned their robes and religious titles in support of choice, while conveniently never addressing what people are choosing to do. These are the knees that have bowed the knee to Baal and the mouths who have kissed his image.

We have in our culture countenanced by a bizarre notion that even though our acts are atrocious, we can be comforted because God knows our hearts. If God's knowledge of our hearts is where we find our comfort, we either have an inflated view of our hearts or a distorted or even defiled view of who God is and what He requires of man. Be that as it may, we should not court such a disjointed notion of the faith which resides in our hearts and the actions which extend to our members. It has been observed:

But that no one may under this error indulge his own sloth, as many seek hiding-places for their vices in the hidden providences of God, it is right to observe again, — that they only are said to be saved who continue sound and unpolluted in the faith of God. This circumstance in the case ought also to be noticed, — that those only remained safe who did not prostitute their body, no, not even by an external act of dissimulation (to feign—hypocrisy), to the worship of idols; for he not only ascribes to them a purity of mind, but that they had also kept their body from being polluted by any filthiness of superstition. ³⁸

³⁸ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 11:2). Albany, OR: Ages Software.
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Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What objection is the Apostle Paul answering in chapters 9 through 11 of Romans? Why would that objection be raised in the first place?
2. Discuss and define the difference between the visible and the invisible church. Why is that distinction important?
3. Why does the Apostle bring up his religious heritage? What difference did it make? Where did he find his comfort?
4. What is an Elijah Complex? What are the dangers of having one?
5. What errors can we run into when we seek to calculate those who are left to serve the Lord?
6. Are faithfulness and apostasy observable in any sense? Explain your answer. Give examples.

Romans 11:1-6

The Election of Grace – Part III

November 1, 2015

I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, “*Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life*”? But what does the divine response say to him? “*I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.*” Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then *it is* no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if *it is* of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work (Romans 11:1-6).

Review

The Apostle Paul is answering the objection that God has somehow not kept His word—to be faithful to the promises made to Israel (Romans 9:6). The confusion is made manifest when we see those wonderful promises—the covenant promises—that were aimed originally at Israel extended to the church in Romans 8. A critical element in understanding our Bibles correctly is grasping the distinction between how God addresses people corporately versus how He addresses people individually.

As we learned earlier, the Israelite was not, by virtue of his ethnicity, excluded from the covenant blessings of God. The gospel is universal. Paul himself enjoyed the fullness of God’s grace and was of the Seed of Abraham and the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1). But that was not his testimony of peace with God—it was quite the opposite. This was a testimony of everything Paul denied in order that he might be found in Christ...

...not having (his) own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:9).

In order to establish the faithfulness of God and the comfort and assurance of his readers (and of himself) Paul appeals to something even prior to faith—he appeals to the foreknowledge of God (Romans 11:2a). As discussed last time, this is not mere foresight but foreknowledge. That is to say that it was not *something* God knew but *someone* God knew. He knew His own from eternity past—**“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4).**

The Apostle then clarifies that this distinction between visible and invisible—between mere outward inclusion and true faithfulness—is nothing new. Paul brings up the example of Elijah and his failure to make this distinction. We learned that we must be careful in our counting but also how the faithless are marked out by an observable act—bowing the knee to Baal.

The Apostle now culminates his explanation by dialing in to the heart of the matter—*who are the objects of God’s covenant promises and how have they become so?* And with his explanation he offers what it cannot be.

Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace (Romans 11:5).

Designed For Comfort

Let us not forget Paul’s sentiment as he writes these words; he would be himself **“accursed from Christ...for (his) countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites” (Romans 9:3, 4).** His **“heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved” (Romans 10:1).** He is vehemently refuting the notion that God would **“cast away His people” (Romans 11:1).**

And the bedrock of his presentation is the foreknowledge of God as it is manifested in **“the election of grace” *eklogen charitos***—that there is a remnant that God has graciously chosen to be His own.

It is a much hated and despised doctrine by both the world and, sadly, the church.

But somehow when people grasp this doctrine of election—that eternal choices are made in the hidden chambers of eternity by God—they can become almost annoyingly excited about it; a disposition we must be careful about.

In Mark Rushdoony's presentation during our recent conference, he shared how he asked for his father's (R.J. Rushdoony) advice on how to argue for the doctrines of grace (i.e. Calvinism) in a Bible study he was about to attend. His father counseled him: "Don't argue it...it's designed to comfort the dying." As if it was something too sacred for mundane dialogue.

But what can be of greater solace to the soul when a creature, on his deathbed, becomes so intimately acquainted with his weakness—his lack of anything to offer or achieve—than to know that all that is necessary for his eternal peace has been accomplished by someone else? And that 'someone else' is the Christ—the eternal Son of God made flesh, who cancelled...

...the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him (Colossians 2:14, 15).

Yet we should not be insensitive to the natural consternation which comes to the minds of the men when confronted with such an infinitely gracious teaching—a teaching which assumes the absolute sovereignty of God. The natural mind, and even the Christian mind, finds this notion almost indigestible. There is very much a 'who does God think He is' sentiment rattling in our heads.

John Calvin called the matter under our observation the *decretum horrible*, or the horrible decrees, which in the Latin means 'awe inspiring'. The authors of the Westminster Confession, no doubt, had a very pastoral concern when they wrote in WCF 3, 8

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men, attending the will of

God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.

It is a doctrine which should not be handled recklessly. Most Christians I know who resist this teaching have been presented with a false caricature of it. Perhaps this is a result of it being handled imprudently—or perhaps, as Paul Simon wrote, “A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.”

Whatever it may be, when the Lord answered Job for four entire chapters (Job 38-41) of how He was the absolute, sovereign, decision-making God, the few responses we see from Job should serve to instruct us:

Then Job answered the Lord and said: “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth” (Job 40:3, 4).

Then Job answered the Lord and said: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:1-3).

Common Objections/Interpretations

At the same time, it might be helpful to address some of the common objections or interpretations of this teaching of election. I was recently in a discussion with a lady who was nervous that her church might be moving in a reformed direction and was not at all comfortable with predestination.

I shared with her that the word “**predestination**” (*proorizo* *pro*-before and *horizo*-to determine) is used many times in the Bible

(Acts 4:28, Romans 8:29, 30, 1 Corinthians 2:7, Ephesians 1:5, 11). It is not a man-made concept. She was quick to suggest that we don't all agree on what it means. Fair enough—although the natural reading seems quite clear albeit challenging.

We certainly don't have time to address all of the objections/interpretations. Perhaps more will come up in question and answer. Some include:

Choosing Corporately

Some posit that God's gracious election is not the choosing of individuals but of nations or the church—in other words, it is corporate election. God's choosing Jacob over Esau, it is supposed, was actually His choosing Israel or Edom. Of course, one is hard-pressed to see how that solves the problem. Would it not have at the very least included the choosing of Jacob as an individual over Esau?

And are not groups of people made up of individuals? Certainly, there may be a sense where God (as we learned earlier) chooses an assembly or a collection, e.g. Israel or the church. But would it not be necessary for there to at least be some individual elect among the corporate elect (as with Elijah's complaint)?

Without God choosing Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be His faithful servants, there is no corporate Israel. Without Jesus choosing the Apostles to be His faithful followers there is no corporate church. In fact, when the corporate entity finds itself bereft of the individual elect—those who truly have faith—it eventually loses the designation, as with Israel (Matthew 21:43) and many churches (Romans 11:18-22).

Foreseen Works

Another option people prefer is that God elects based upon what He knows people will do in the future. In this view God looks down the corridor of time and sees that a person will have faith or will perform good works, then He chooses that person.

I once heard a pastor teaching on this and comparing it to a race. He said that God knows who is going to win the race, so He picks the person He knows will win. "God picks winners, beloved!" was his word of encouragement to his congregation. This seems so

antithetical (not only here, but truly to the entirety of Scripture), specifically to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians.

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence (1 Corinthians 1:26-30).

If our message is that God elects based upon His foreknowledge of something virtuous He anticipates in flowing from our own natures (whether than virtue is obedience, humility or even faith), how will we avoid being tempted to **“glory in His presence”**?

Add to that, if God knows we will have faith, why would He need to choose us? We were clearly doing fine on our own. And how does verse 6 allow for future works? Works in the past or works in the future are still works. If there is a teaching Paul seems to continually harp on, it is that we are saved by grace apart from the works of the law (Romans 3:28). He continues his harping in verse 6.

And if by grace, then *it is* no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if *it is* of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work (Romans 11:6).

Works or Grace?

“Works” *ergon* is another word that is pummeled by the hammer of equivocation, as if Paul is speaking of a certain type of works—perhaps religious ceremonial works (e.g. circumcision or some other typological and, therefore, abrogated Old Covenant work). And although there may be places where the works of the law may focus upon those types of things, it should be a horrible thought in the

mind of any man that he can somehow approve himself before God through the force of his own will or actions of any kind.

“**Works**” might be best understood as anything that is generated from the will or mind of man—anything that begins with us. This is why it is so critical to recognize that faith itself is a gift from God and not something produced in the factory of the fallen human soul.

Paul so places works against grace to make it clear that if it is one it is not the other. If it is works then it is not grace and if it is grace, then it is not works. And to seek to create an amalgamation of the two is like putting a drop of poison in a cup of pure water.

It has been written:

That there are but two possible sources of salvation—men’s works, and God’s grace; and that these are so essentially distinct and opposite, that salvation cannot be of any combination or mixture of both, but must be wholly either of the one or of the other.³⁹

We will shortly be coming to the Lord’s Table. We will remember that it was His body that was broken, it was His blood that was shed. Would it not be unthinkable idolatry to somehow place the broken body and shed blood of any other person on the table or in the cup?

When a Christian examines himself in coming to the table, as we are called to do (1 Corinthians 11:28), we are not assessing whether or not we possess the requisite virtue—moral, volitional or otherwise—to sit at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. What we are to remember is not what we have done, but what has been done for us.

³⁹ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Vol. 2, p. 249). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why would some think God had not been faithful to keep His promises to Israel?
2. Was the Apostle Paul excluded from the promises of God because he was an Israelite? What took place for him, and what takes place for us, to be found in Christ?
3. What happened prior to faith which yields comfort? What is the difference between foresight and foreknowledge?
4. Why do you suppose people resist the doctrine of election? Why do you suppose others are so comforted by it? How is it comforting to the dying?
5. How should the teaching of predestination be handled? How have you seen it handled?
6. Does election only apply to groups? Explain your answer.
7. Does God choose based upon what He foresees a person doing? Why is this a valid or invalid understanding of election?
8. What is a work? What is grace? Discuss these two things in light of election and salvation. For example, are we saved by grace *and* faith or grace *through* faith? Why would that make a difference?

Romans 11:7-10

The Audacity

November 15, 2015

What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written: “God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day.” And David says: “Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a recompense to them. Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, and bow down their back always” (Romans 11:7-10).

Introduction

Perhaps the problem is the relative ease in which we have lived. The ‘we’ of whom I speak is today’s free and prosperous westerner. And what is the ‘problem’? The problem is preaching a sermon on a passage which contains nothing less than shock value, as in the four verses before us.

Not only do these verses speak of election, they speak of divine blinding, a God-given stupor, a table that becomes a stumbling block and a source of retribution (payback), and, finally, the condition of compulsory servitude on the part of those who would oppress that which is good and godly.

How much easier would it be to fast-forward to chapter 12, where we can speak of the very challenging yet palatable call to live holy lives and think holy thoughts! One labors to extract the redemptive message found in this passage. We are forced to reach beyond the boundaries of our comfortable experience, where the Christian faith is more of a highly demanding method of psychological comfort, and cultural and familial tips on wisdom, a cut above Oprah and Dr. Phil with heaven thrown in for good measure. How different the faith has been through the ages!

We have not stood in the lineup anticipating with horror the crushing jaws of a lion consuming our wives and children before cheering crowds simply because they follow Jesus. We have no close friends who have been burned alive for their doctrinal convictions,

buried then exhumed and burned again so their ashes would be thrown in a river to be rapidly forgotten. None of us are intimately acquainted with the deportation and mass murder just 100 years ago among the Armenians or, of course those victims of the Third Reich. All ancient history to us—footnotes.

Getting a little closer to home, we begin to observe (even now in the 21st century) harsh, international anti-Christian sentiments. I recently had dinner with my neighbors. Of the four couples, two couples were Coptic Christians. They began speaking of friends who were still in Egypt, being slaughtered for their faith by ISIS.

It is generally not at the top of the list of memory verses or on the bottom of the In-n-Out Burger fountain drink to read:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 6:9, 10)?

Not to engage in negative prognostications, but I do pray that my children and the Christians to whom I have sought to minister become better Christians than I—brave, virtuous, knowledgeable, faithful and strong in their convictions.

Be that as it may, the words of the apostle in this passage would have been a source of great comfort to those who were **“killed all day long...accounted as sheep for the slaughter” (Romans 8:36)**. There is a God in heaven who will set things right.

O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear¹⁸ to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more (Psalm 10:17, 18).

What is the purpose of the insertion of this passage? Let us not forget that Paul is, as it were, an apologist for the faithfulness of God and His word. He is explaining their error when they entertain

the notion that **“the word of God has failed” (Romans 9:6)**. It is toward the final turn of his apologetic that he offers the interrogative **“What then?”** *tis oun* with which he will sum up what he has been saying for the last two chapters.

What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded (Romans 11:7).

What Religion Seeks

Israel had not obtained what it was seeking. *What were they seeking?* What does all religion seek—and perhaps in a less “religious” way, what does every person seek?

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works (Romans 9:30-32).

Every man (somewhere in his soul) and every religious pursuit wants **“righteousness”** *dikaiosynen* or, to use another translation of the same word, every man wants to be **“justified.”** Some want to be justified before God and others want to feel justified in themselves (as if the satisfaction of my own conscience is the ultimate achievement). I have been known to harp on a point because I want to justify my position before other people. But the justification of self is not an argument you want to get into with God.

Then Job answered and said: “Truly I know that it is so: But how can a man be in the right⁴⁰ before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times” (Job 9:1-3).

⁴⁰ The Septuagint uses *dikaiois* for “right” in this verse.

What Israel failed to pursue and certainly failed to obtain—what all fail to obtain—is righteousness before God. This righteousness comes by faith and by faith alone.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:1, 2).

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Romans 3:28).

It is a sad state of affairs in the human soul that we are wholly inclined to refuse the gift of righteousness which comes through the blood of Christ. The fall has so corrupted us that it is woven into our natures to hate that (the only One) which is good and right and true and pure. Truly, it takes an act of God to subdue our otherwise obstinate hearts!

The Audacity of God

That which Israel (or any person or religion) could not obtain, **“the elect have obtained.”** Literarily, the verse reads **“election has obtained”** in order (it has been suggested—and I agree) that the emphasis focus upon the work of God rather than some quality in the elect.

The apostle then takes a turn in his apologetic that makes the natural mind cringe—and sadly, even the mind of some of the elect. He placards the audacity of God with the words **“and the rest were blinded.”**

Unlike so many of us who feel the need to present a more benign god—a god who sits on his hands while men make the big decisions—Paul presents a God who is sovereign, not merely over the affairs of men, but over the hearts of men.

The king’s heart *is* in the hand of the Lord, *as* the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever he will (Proverbs 21:1).

As emboldened as the ungodly may become—as confident as they might seek to stand—as high as their tower ascends on which they shake their fist—God will never be on the defense. He has His own fist, and He gathers the wind in it.

**Who has ascended to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has
wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has
established all the ends of the earth? What is his
name, and what is his son’s name? Surely you know
(Proverbs 30:4)!**

Of the above verse it has been said:

If the inhabitant of the earth looks up to the blue heavens streaming in the golden sunlight, or sown with the stars of night; if he considers the interchange of the seasons, and feels the sudden rising of the wind; if he sees the upper waters clothed in fleecy clouds, and yet held fast within them floating over him; if he lets his eye sweep the horizon all around him to the ends of the earth, built up upon nothing in the open world-space (Job 26:7): the conclusion comes to him that he has before him in the whole the work of an everywhere present Being, of an all-wise omnipotent Worker—it is the Being whom he has just named as אֱל, the absolute Power, and as the קֹדֶשִׁים, exalted above all created beings...⁴¹

The apostle then builds upon the power of God over the hearts of men. He does not do this with new revelation, but with reference to that which the accusers should have already been acquainted—the Scriptures.

Just as it is written: “God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear,

⁴¹ Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (1996). *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Vol. 6, p. 447). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

to this very day.” And David says: “Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a recompense to them. Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, and bow down their back always” (Romans 11:8-10).

Unsearchable Judgments

There is no way to read this passage without acknowledging God as the cause of stupor (the state of not being able to think, bewilderment), blindness, and spiritual deafness. Some will say that God merely hardened them in their own rebellious convictions, but how does that address the real issue? Could not God have done that to any one of us (see Romans 3:10-18)?

The world, and even some believers, are more comforted with the notion of luck or chance when it comes to the destiny of souls. But Paul would countenance no such irrational solution. There is a divine plan—a holy orchestration. Paul will later acknowledge the **“unsearchable”** nature of God’s judgments. **“Unsearchable”** does not mean irrational or illogical. It means unfathomable. It is beyond our depth or height to grasp.

It must be noted that all men in every field and in all endeavors, whether with microscopes or telescopes, will reach a place where they must inevitably scratch their heads and say to themselves, “My anchor cannot reach the sand.” There are judgments that are divine. It is precisely here that we would be wise to heed the words of Calvin to **“wonder at the incomprehensible counsel of God.”**

Accountability before God

Let us also note that the sovereignty of God in no ways mitigates or lessens the accountability of man. Evil men will sit in comfort at their tables with their feet on the neck of the widow and the fatherless. But that very table will become a trap and they will find that their very method of oppression will be upon their own backs. It is no small thing to revel in sin before man and God.

What we shall see later in this chapter is God’s divine and gracious plan which includes this hardening **“until the fullness of the gentiles has come in” (Romans 11:25).** But for now, let us take

refuge in a Table that will never become a snare or a trap—a Table of divine feasting and eternal peace and comfort.

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God” (Revelation 19:9).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why do you think a passage like Romans 11:7-10 is so difficult?
2. What is the purpose for this passage in the context of Romans 9 through 11?
3. What does all “religion” seek? What do all people seek? How is this generally sought?
4. How does one find peace, righteousness and justification before God?
5. Discuss the sovereignty of God over the affairs of men and over the hearts of men. How should we respond to this?
6. Does God’s sovereignty lessen human accountability? Discuss your answer.

Romans 11:11-15

Their Failure, Their Fullness – Part I

Stumble but Not Fall

December 6, 2015

I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation *has come* to the Gentiles. Now if their fall *is* riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy *those who are* my flesh and save some of them. For if their being cast away *is* the reconciling of the world, what *will* their acceptance *be* but life from the dead (Romans 11:11-15)?

Introduction

It is quite cliché nowadays to say that the Lord works in mysterious ways. Yet it is not altogether unbiblical. In this very chapter, Paul desires his readers to not be ignorant of the mysterious providential workings of God. A *mystery* is not a contradiction nor is it merely an escape clause for something inexplicable. It is generally referring to something unknown or unanticipated that is then revealed or disclosed (Romans 16:25, 26; Ephesians 1:9; 3:3). A mystery movie or book would be quite unsatisfying if it ended still being a mystery.

And the unanticipated action will often run contrary to what we might consider to be the most natural course of action. I do find things emotionally vexing as I observe what happens in the world, in our nation, in my own community and even among my own friends and church family. Things don't always unfold the way I might prefer or the way which seems most reasonable or expeditious to me.

Whether it is the hard-heartedness of unbelievers or stubbornness of fellow Christians or my own ethical and intellectual shortcomings, I think to myself:

**How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? How
long must I take counsel in my soul and have
sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my
enemy be exalted over me (Psalm 13:1, 2)?**

So often I am tempted to take counsel in my own “soul”, to navigate through my culture, friends and self through my own psychological ability to find some peace in the anarchy. The Psalm concludes with David finding solace, not in a specific answer, but in Christ Himself.

**But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart
shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the
Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me
(Psalm 13:5, 6).**

Let us not, in our study of this passage, lose sight of the troubled spirit draped over Paul’s heart in these very meaty chapters of Romans. He is defending the very trustworthiness of God (Romans 9:6) while his heart aches for his apostate fellow Israelite countrymen (Romans 9:3; 10:1; 11:14), though his specific ministry was to the gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; Galatians 1:16; 2:7-9; Ephesians 3:8).

He will begin to reveal the providential works of God as it speaks to the ethnic Israelite, the Israelite of promise and the gentiles. It also shows that God is indeed faithful to His covenant. And in so doing, Paul finds a comfort which yields this inevitable doxology:

**Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and
knowledge of God (Romans 11:33)!**

When the Lord reveals His wise and mighty hand, our response should be a doxology (to burst forth in worship and glory).

The great comfort of the Christian—the heart of our peace—is that we serve a covenant-making covenant-keeping God. And regardless of how things might appear at any given time in our lives or history, His hand is not too short to accomplish His purpose

(Numbers 11:23) and no intention of His can be thwarted (Job 42:2). And His own children are at the heart of His power and plans.

And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:22, 23).

So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

So what is the providential working which leads to the doxology? As you may recall, Paul is making a distinction between the Israel of promise and ethnic Israel. Or, to put it in his words:

But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they *are* not all Israel who *are* of Israel, nor *are* they all children because they are the seed of Abraham (Romans 9:6, 7).

God has certainly kept His covenant promise to the true Israel—those Israelites who, like Paul, pursued righteousness by faith and not by the works of the law (Romans 9:30-32). The Father sent His Son into the midst of a very religious community—the covenant community—and instead of embracing the fulfillment of the promise, they stumbled over Him and He became a rock of offense (Romans 9:33).

It makes you wonder how today's religious communities would fare. Would the true Christ be a welcomed guest in our houses of worship or would he be considered a rebel and an inconvenience?

Be that as it may, the Israelites, for the most part, wanted nothing of Jesus. There was a remnant of faithful believers within Israel (Romans 11:2-5), but what of the rest? Paul rhetorically asks,

I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not (Romans 11:11a)!

Unredeemable

What does it mean that they hadn't **"stumbled"** that they should **"fall"**? What is the difference between a mere stumble and a falling? In short, to **"fall"** means to reach a point of no return—to be in an unredeemable condition. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine with any degree of accuracy who has crossed this boundary. We know that blasphemy **"against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:29)**. This appears to happen when one assigns to the devil those things which were the works of the Spirit.⁴²

John also writes of a **"sin that leads to death"** and how we should not pray for that (1 John 5:16). The author of Hebrews also speaks of those who have participated in spiritual activities among the people of God and then **"fall away"**, that it is **"impossible...to renew them again to repentance" (Hebrews 6:4-6)**.

Peter writes of a similar example.

For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire" (2 Peter 2:21, 22).

Perseverance?

Some may ask how this speaks to the perseverance of the saints. The answer is not terribly difficult. As we discussed earlier, one must recognize the times when the Scriptures speak individually and when they speak corporately. One might address a community of the saints (as is the case with so many epistles), but that does not mean all within that community are truly regenerate (born again). That is as true with the church as it was with Israel.

⁴² Some believe this sin could only have happened during the lifetime of Christ and of the apostles.

A Bad Day?

In all of this talk of falling away, one might be concerned that they can have a bad day and commit the unforgiveable sin. And some discuss whether or not the unredeemable condition is a result of God's unwillingness to redeem man or man's unwillingness to repent. In its own way, it includes both, but what is important for us to note is that God will never turn away a repentant sinner.

4. As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; (Rom. 6:23, Rom. 5:12, Matt. 12:36) so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent. (Isa. 55:7, Rom. 8:1, Isa. 1:16, 18)⁴³

In short, anyone who is willing to call upon the name of the Lord has not stumbled that they should fall.

Hope for Israel

Of course, the Apostle is writing here of a corporate entity. Ethnic Israel—Israel as a nation—had not stumbled that they should fall. There was still hope for them; Paul himself was an example. They had not reached that level that Sodom had reached (this may very well have been the concern, since Paul had earlier compared them to Sodom—Romans 9:29).

Sodom was a nation which stumbled that they should fall. They were entirely unredeemable. One thinks of Abraham's negotiating with God—if there were 50, 45, 30, 20 or even 10 righteous people there would have been hope for Sodom (Genesis 18:22-33). But the Scriptures become explicit regarding Sodom's full commitment to ungodliness.

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you

⁴³ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them” (Genesis 19:4, 5).

As you know, Sodom was entirely destroyed (Genesis 19:25), and Israel would soon find themselves the object of God’s judgment. Within 15 years of the writing of this epistle, their temple would be destroyed and their culture under severe siege (Matthew 24), but they would not have the destiny of Sodom. They would continue as a people with the hope of redemption—if they would abandon their works righteousness and rely entirely upon grace through faith in the Promised Messiah then their hope would be the same as any sinner’s hope—the hope of grace.

The Apostle will now turn to explain the mystery—a mystery which includes the provocation of jealousy—the value of their failure and the joy of their acceptance. We will pursue that in our next meeting.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What does it mean that the Lord works in mysterious ways? What is a mystery?
2. Do you find events in your life or world often run contrary to your expectations or hope? Where do you find peace or hope?
3. What troubled the Apostle Paul? What led to the doxology?
4. Would Jesus be welcomed into your religious community? What concerns do you see surfacing if that were to happen?
5. Discuss the notion of what it means to be unredeemable.
6. How does falling away (Hebrews 6:4-6) interact with the perseverance of the saints?
7. How would a person know they have not fallen into an unredeemable condition?
8. How had Israel become like Sodom? How were they not like Sodom? Why was there still hope for them? Where did their hope lie?

Romans 11:11-15

Their Failure, Their Fullness – Part II

Provoked to Jealousy

December 13, 2015

I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation *has come* to the Gentiles. Now if their fall *is* riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy *those who are* my flesh and save some of them. For if their being cast away *is* the reconciling of the world, what *will* their acceptance *be* but life from the dead (Romans 11:11-15)?

Introduction

We had mentioned last time that there is some legitimacy in the notion that God works in mysterious ways. The very passage we are examining today contains the disclosure of a mystery that the Apostle Paul did not want his readers to miss.

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25).

A **mystery** *mysterion* is not a contradiction nor is it merely an escape clause for something inexplicable. It is generally referring to something that is at first unknown or unanticipated and is then revealed or disclosed (Romans 16:25, 26; Ephesians 1:9; 3:3). *Is God still working in mysterious ways?* Yes, but we do not have modern day prophets or apostles who can lift the veil of God's secret counsel as we see here with the Apostle.

The comfort of our souls is in the knowledge that our Father in heaven has things well in hand. And He will providentially reveal to us what we need to know when we need to know it.

When we take our family to the theatre or an amusement park, we do not give the children their tickets until they are standing in line. There is no reason for them to have them before then—they may lose them or trade them for magic beans. Likewise, God will let us know what we need to know, when we need to know it. Once He does, we are called to respond appropriately.

In order for us to grasp the passage before us it would be helpful for us to know that we are observing in the gospels and letters of the New Testament a transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. God had preserved Israel because it would be through Israel that the promised seed—that is, Christ—would come. It is for this reason that two of the four gospels (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38) begin with a genealogy.

But it was always God's plan to save the world (John 3:17), not merely one nation. This goes all the way back to Genesis—clearly seen in the promise made to Abraham:

I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

What would the fulfillment of this promise look like? We should not be ignorant of this. It should not have even been a mystery.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:8, 9).

God had made a promise. He had kept that promise—a promise which is to be preached and to which there is to be a response of faith and repentance.

And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself (Acts 2:38, 39).

God had not failed to keep His promise (Romans 9:6) as some were supposing. God’s promise was not merely that He would send His Son to save sinners but that He would call sinners to Himself (Acts 2:39). But whether it was the Old Covenant or New Covenant, the instrument by which God would save was faith—Abel offered a sacrifice in faith—by faith Enoch did not see death—by faith Noah constructed an ark—by faith Abraham obeyed—whether Old or New, without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11). One is not saved by works or by inclusion in a community—even the covenant community. We are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

The community of which Paul was part had lost sight of that. And instead of repenting, they—as men are accustomed to do—were accusing. This is the question Paul was addressing: *What of that community? What of Israel?* Toward the end of chapter nine, Paul conveyed that if it was not for the seed they would have shared the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Romans 9:29). Of course, now the seed (Christ) had come; so the question becomes, *would they have the fate of Sodom?* The answer was ‘no’.

But let us not draw the conclusion that because God chooses not to judge in history (as with Sodom), those from whom He has withheld judgment have somehow found favor in His sight—as many Bible teachers tend to do with Israel in this passage. The great error of Israel—the great error of many religious communities—is to assume that being part of a religion is the answer to man’s dilemma with sin and death. As this very passage tells us, the Apostle Paul’s great desire was that those who were his **“flesh”** might be saved (Romans 11:14).

Many Christians today find themselves discouraged and perplexed by the religious, political and cultural environment in which we find ourselves. How much more was this true during the writing of this epistle! There was very little faith to be found in the

covenant community (a mere remnant—Romans 11:5), the political climate was hostile (for God’s sake they were killed all day long: accounted as sheep for the slaughter—Romans 8:36) and there was conflict within the church itself (Romans 2).

The Apostle gives the ministerial answer to these conflicts and confusions. He is defending the very trustworthiness of God (Romans 9:6) while his heart aches for his apostate fellow Israelite countrymen (Romans 9:3; 10:1; 11:14), although his specific ministry was to the gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; Galatians 1:16; 2:7-9; Ephesians 3:8).

He will begin to reveal the providential works of God as it speaks to the ethnic Israelite, the Israelite of promise and the gentiles. It also shows that God is indeed faithful to His covenant. And in so doing Paul finds a comfort which yields the inevitable doxology:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God (Romans 11:33)!

So what is the providential working which leads to the doxology? The Israelites, for the most part, wanted nothing of Jesus. There was a remnant of faithful believers within Israel (Romans 11:2-5), but what of the rest? Paul rhetorically asks if “**they stumbled that they should fall?**” and the answer was “**Certainly not (Romans 11:11a)!**” They had not reached a point where they were unredeemable. There was still hope and a plan.

The Apostle now reveals that plan. He will now explain the mystery—a mystery which includes the provocation of jealousy—the value of their failure and the joy of their acceptance.

But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation *has come* to the Gentiles. Now if their fall *is* riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy *those who are* my flesh and save some of them. For if their being cast away *is* the reconciling of the world, what *will* their acceptance *be* but life from the dead (Romans 11:11-15)?

Jealousy

Part of this mysterious plan is how the Jews will be provoked to jealousy through the salvation of the gentiles. I must admit that I would not have anticipated this as part of the plan of salvation. We might be tempted to view this method as fickle, the way someone in a relationship will get the attention of their partner by flirting with someone else with the goal of making them jealous.

First, we must realize that **jealousy** *parazelosai* is not necessarily a bad thing. In the Ten Commandments, we read that God is a jealous God (Exodus 20:6). It might be helpful to make a distinction between jealousy and **envy** *phthonos*. Envy is wanting something that rightfully belongs to someone else, while jealousy is a response to someone taking that which is rightfully yours.

When God says He is jealous it is not an expression of His insecurity. He conveys the attribute of jealousy in light of His people seeking to create a false image, thus leading them away from His loving guidance—the way a parent might feel jealousy when they observe their child idolizing the neighborhood hooligan. The direction that hooligan leads them will never match the love and wisdom of the parent—how much more with God!

So we shouldn't understand a passage like this to be God tempting the Israelite to an inappropriate passion. In a certain sense the gentiles are fully receiving those covenant promises/privileges which the Israelites viewed as theirs. The Apostle began this entire section writing of the Israelites...

...to whom *pertain* the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises (Romans 9:4).

But they had so distorted the truth that it had become almost unrecognizable as a covenant of grace. They transformed the gift of God (as religious pursuits tend to do) into a quest of man. Paul had earlier taught what the Gentiles did not pursue they still attained against what Israel did pursue yet did not attain.

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to

righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because *they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame” (Romans 9:30-33).*

And of course, the “**stumbling stone**” and “**rock of offense**” was Christ Himself, whose yoke is easy and burden is light (Matthew 11:28). One is invited to strap himself to the efforts of men or to the grace of God.

By grace through faith the Gentiles and a remnant of faithful Israel had obtained that which the works of a religious community could never obtain. It was Paul’s great desire that those who were his “**flesh**” would be provoked to jealousy when they saw that that which was promised in their midst and that which they strove with so much effort to attain was freely given to the faithful:

- Israel was promised the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27), but in Romans 8:4 this promise is fulfilled in the church.
- Israel had been promised a future resurrection (Ezekiel 37), but Paul tells the church that God, who raised Christ, will give life to your mortal bodies (Romans 8:10-11).
- Israel was God’s son (Exodus 4:22), now believers in Christ are sons and daughters (Romans 8:14-17).
- An inheritance was promised to Israel (Isaiah 60), but now the believer is the “joint heir” with Christ (Romans 8:17).

- Israel was God’s chosen people (Amos 3:2), but Paul aims this blessed designation to those who have faith in Christ (Roman 8:29-30).
- God had promised never to forsake Israel (Deuteronomy 31:6), but it is the church—the believer—who can have the assurance that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:39).

It might be important to note just what it was that Paul was hoping the Israelite would be jealous of. What was he hoping they would see in the covenant community that would that would cause their hearts to “**burn within**” them (Luke 24:32)?

Here we must be careful, for the church has become a bit of a strip-mall designed to meet the various social, material and psychological needs of the modern man. We come with our insecurities, heartaches, loneliness, frustrations, fears and families—hoping our religious pursuits will provide the answers. And I think it is appropriate for a good church (and by ‘church’ here I mean the entire fellowship with all the various gifts God has given to the individuals) to address all these things and more.

But the jealousy of which Paul writes is not a jealousy of good marriages, lucrative jobs, psychological security, physical health and well-being, friendships or any other number of things we would all enjoy having. It is a jealousy of having favor with God and the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3). Thinking of human relationships, a man is jealous not because some other man has his wife’s possessions but his wife’s attention or affection.

From time to time, people will switch churches because one church has what another is lacking. It might be the music, the youth group, the focus on marriage and family, the Sunday school program, etc. One might say they are jealous of what the other church is offering. But what we really want people to be jealous of—and strongly desire—is peace with God through Christ. If that is the central focus of the church, we can rest assured that all other secondary issues will be appropriately addressed.

Next time, we will discuss why Paul mentions his ministry to the Gentiles, what it means when he writes of “**their fullness**” and

their “**acceptance**” being “**life from the dead**”. But let us conclude this morning with our hearts set on that which is the rudder of the Christian faith—without which souls and churches are shipwrecked (1 Timothy 1:19)—that peace with God through the cross of Christ must ever be the message.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14, 15).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What is a mystery, as we read in Scripture? How can we take comfort in knowing God works in mysterious ways?
2. Discuss the context of Romans 9 through 11 and why it is important in shaping our understanding of these chapters.
3. What is the Abrahamic Covenant and how do we see it fulfilled?
4. What is God's covenant/promise and how is it fulfilled?
5. Is God's lack of immediate judgment a sign of His favor? Explain.
6. Had Israel stumbled that they should fall? What is meant by that?
7. Is jealousy good or bad? Explain.
8. How did jealousy play into God's plan for redeeming Israelites?
9. What did the gentiles find without looking that Israel did not find? Explain.
10. What was Paul hoping the Israelites would be jealous of?

Romans 11:11-15

Their Failure, Their Fullness – Part III

A Magnified Mystery

January 2, 2016

I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation *has come* to the Gentiles. Now if their fall *is* riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy *those who are* my flesh and save some of them. For if their being cast away *is* the reconciling of the world, what *will* their acceptance *be* but life from the dead (Romans 11:11-15)?

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The comfort of our souls is in the knowledge that our Father in heaven has things well in hand. And He will providentially reveal to us those things that we need to know at the time we need to know it.

When we take our family to the theatre or an amusement park, we do not give the children their tickets until they are standing in line. There is no reason for them to have them before then—they may lose them or trade them for magic beans. God will let us know what we need to know, when we need to know it. Then we are called to respond appropriately.

What we are observing with the gospels and letters of the New Testament is a transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. God had preserved Israel because it would be through Israel that the promised seed—that is, Christ—would come. It is for this reason that two of the four gospels (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38) begin with a genealogy.

But it was always God's plan to save the world (John 3:17), not merely one nation. This goes all the way back to Genesis—clearly seen in the promise made to Abraham:

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What would the fulfillment of this promise look like? We should not be ignorant of this. It should not have even been a mystery.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:8, 9).

God had made a promise. He had kept that promise—a promise which is to be preached. And to which there is to be a response of faith and repentance (Acts 2:38, 29).

God had not failed to keep His promise (Romans 9:6) as some were supposing. God's promise was not merely that He would send

His Son to save sinners but that He would call sinners to Himself (Acts 2:39). But whether it was the Old Covenant or New Covenant, the instrument by which God would save was *faith*—whether Old or New, without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11). One is not saved by works or by inclusion in a community—even the covenant community. We are saved *by grace through faith* (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

The community of which Paul was a part had lost sight of that. And instead of repenting, they—as men are accustomed to do—were accusing. The question now was: *What of that community? What of Israel?* Toward the end of chapter nine, Paul conveyed that if not for the seed they would have had the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Romans 9:29). Of course, now the seed (Christ) had come, so *would they have the fate of Sodom?* The answer was ‘no’. Israel was not beyond redemption.

But let us not draw the conclusion that because God chooses not to judge in history (as with Sodom) that those from whom He has withheld judgment have somehow found favor in His sight—as many Bible teachers tend to do with Israel in this passage. The great error of Israel—the great error of many religious communities—is to assume that being part of a religion is the answer to man’s dilemma with sin and death. As this very passage tells us, the Apostle Paul’s great desire was that those who were his **“flesh”** might be saved (Romans 11:14).

Many Christians today find themselves discouraged and perplexed by the religious, political and cultural environment in which we find ourselves. How much more was this true during the writing of this epistle! There was very little faith to be found in the covenant community (a mere remnant—Romans 11:5), the political climate was hostile (for God’s sake they were killed all day long: accounted as sheep for the slaughter—Romans 8:36) and there was conflict within the church itself (Romans 2).

The Apostle gives the ministerial answer to these conflicts and confusions. He is defending the very trustworthiness of God (Romans 9:6) while his heart aches for his apostate fellow Israelite countrymen (Romans 9:3; 10:1; 11:14), though his specific ministry was to the gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; Galatians 1:16; 2:7-9; Ephesians 3:8).

He will begin to reveal the providential works of God as it speaks to the ethnic Israelite, the Israelite of promise and the gentiles.

It also shows that God is indeed faithful to His covenant. And in so doing Paul finds a comfort which yields the inevitable doxology.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God (Romans 11:33)!

So, what is the providential working which leads to the doxology? The Israelites, for the most part, wanted nothing to do with Jesus. There was a remnant of faithful believers within Israel (Romans 11:2-5), but what of the rest? Paul rhetorically asks if “**they stumbled that they should fall?**” and the answer was “**Certainly not**” (Romans 11:11a)! They had not reached a point where they were unredeemable. There was still hope and a plan.

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Jealousy

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So we should not understand a passage like this to be God tempting the Israelite to an inappropriate passion. In a certain sense, the gentiles are fully receiving those covenant promises/privileges which the Israelites viewed as theirs. The Apostle began this entire section writing of the Israelites...

...to whom *pertain* the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises (Romans 9:4).

But they had so distorted the truth that it had become almost unrecognizable as a covenant of grace. They transformed the gift of God (as religious pursuits tend to do) into a quest of man. Paul had earlier taught that though the Gentiles did not pursue righteousness they still attained against it. Israel did pursue yet did not attain it because they pursued it by **“the works of the law” (Romans 9:32).**

By grace through faith the Gentiles and a remnant of faithful Israel had obtained that which the works of a religious community could never obtain. It was Paul’s great desire that those who were his **“flesh”** would be provoked to jealousy when they saw that the thing which was promised in their midst and that which they strove with so much effort to attain was freely given to the faithful:

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It might be important to note just what it was that Paul was hoping the Israelite would be jealous of. But the jealousy of which Paul writes is not a jealousy of good marriages, lucrative jobs, psychological security, physical health and well-being, friendships or any other number of things we would all enjoy having. It is a jealousy of having favor with God and the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3). Thinking of human relationships, a man is jealous not because some other man has his wife’s possessions but his wife’s attention or affection.

What we really want people to be jealous of—and strongly desire—is peace with God through Christ. If that is the central focus of the church, we can rest assured that all other secondary issues will be appropriately addressed.

Paul then mentions the **“failure”** of the Jews, but then also their **“fullness” (Romans 11:12)**. These nouns are parallel to **“cast away”** and **“acceptance” (Romans 11:15)**. This culminates with Paul rejoicing that when they come to faith it will be nothing less than **“life from the dead.”** This is a ministerial heart which cares greatly for the lost—even the lost who are adversarial in their words and actions.

In summary, the turn of events goes like this:

- The Jews reject Jesus and the grace of the gospel
- God turns to the nations and begins the Great Commission
- The Jews will, through a sort of jealousy, turn back to Christ

Apostle to the Gentiles

Paul did not view his specific calling to minister to the gentiles as a neglect of his fellow countrymen. No, the more he “**magnify(y)ied**” *doxazo* his ministry to the gentiles, the more it would provide that which would yield that which would appeal to his fellow Israelite.

It was kind of a ‘first things first’ commitment that we are to have.

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10).

Though Paul had a conviction to be “**all things to all people, that by all means I might save some**” (1 Corinthians 9:22, 23), it was never at the expense of the truth of his message and the primary focus of his ministerial attention.

You may wish to think of it this way: when someone visits a church, they are often put off if they are ignored or not warmly greeted. It is certainly nice when a visitor is greeted and welcomed. But if I were looking for a church I would be more observant of their love for one another than their skill at greeting a visitor.

Conclusion

What do we make of this passage? Where is the ministerial comfort? Where is the challenge in terms of our faithfulness? First, we see Paul’s disclosing of God’s faithfulness. His word—His promises—have not failed (Romans 9:6). Just because things don’t unfold quite the way we would like or anticipate does not mean God is unfaithful. God is not about accommodating our plans. We are to trust in His plan and make sure we are on the right side of it—which means to ever trust in His gracious provision in Christ.

Secondly, we must be careful that we magnify the ministry that God calls us to magnify. Paul, like John the Baptist, Stephen (Acts 6:11) and Jesus Himself (John 8:48), appeared to pit himself against the religious community in such a way as to be accused of being an enemy to the true and living God. But regardless of those

threats and accusations, he would magnify a ministry that set its lens on Christ; as John the Baptist said: **“He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30)**. As Mary said: **“My soul magnifies the Lord” (Luke 1:46)**.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What is a mystery according to the Bible? What is not a mystery? Why do you suppose there are mysteries?
2. What is significant about the transition from the Old to the New Covenant?
3. What was the promise that God made? How was that promise fulfilled?
4. How was Israel compared to Sodom? How was it not like Sodom?
5. What was the religious and political climate like during the time the epistle to the Romans was written? How does that speak to us today?
6. Explain the use of jealousy in the salvation of Paul's countrymen.
7. How was the apostle's ministry to the gentiles beneficial to the Jews? What do we learn from this?

Romans 11:16-18

The Root Supports You

January 10, 2016

For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you (Romans 11:16-18).

Introduction

We see in this passage the Apostle using two illustrations—one from the law and one from nature. In the law, the people of Israel were to bring the first loaf from their dough as a contribution. That loaf (the firstfruit), being holy, gave warrant to consider the entire lump (all the dough) holy (Numbers 15:17-21).

Paul then uses the parallel from nature. If a root is holy, one can rest assured that the branches are holy. So we see a relationship here between that which is produced and that which produces it—a holy root produces holy branches and a holy loaf sanctifies the lump of dough from which the loaf is derived. The holiness of the loaf sanctifies all the dough.

When people are going to get married they will often taste a portion of a wedding cake to see if they like it and want to serve it at their reception. If the portion they eat tastes delicious, it gives us some information about the entire wedding cake—if the loaf is good (holy) the dough must be good (holy).

In a moment, we will discuss what the firstfruits, lumps, roots, branches and olives (trees) mean, but for now let us not lose sight of the point of this passage which culminates with the imperative “**do not boast against the branches**” because “**you do not support the root, but the root supports you (Romans 11:18)**.” We see in this passage one of the many admonitions against boasting found in Scripture. Here we are forbidden to boast against the branches because we are supported by the root.

Earlier, Paul excluded any warrant for boasting by the Jew (Romans 3:27-30). Here, he is excluding any warrant for boasting by the Gentile. If there is nothing new under the sun, it certainly includes conflicts among the people of God in His church! Now, onto the lumps and branches:

For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches (Romans 11:16).

Firstfruit, Lump, Root, Branches

There is no unanimous consent as to what all these things mean. Here are the prevailing positions:

- Firstfruits=Patriarchs/Christ /Remnant of Jewish Christians
- Lump=Israelites
- Root=Patriarchs/Christ/Remnant of Jewish Christians
- Branches=Israelites
- Olive tree=People of God
- Wild Olive=Gentile Christians

The message does not necessarily change dramatically based upon which position one takes. If the firstfruits or root is the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) rather than Christ (which might appear significantly different), it is only the Patriarchs based upon the promise of the Messiah that was given to them and so, by extension, still goes to Christ.

So this verse unfolds to the effect: The “**firstfruits**” (the Patriarchs through whom the covenant was made) were holy and therefore became the means by which God sanctified the “**lump.**” That is to say that God set Abraham aside and it was through the promise made to Abraham that Israel became God’s chosen people, i.e. the holy “**lump.**”

Redemption from Israel

To put this in historical, flesh-and-blood terms, in the Old Covenant redemption was found in Israel.

He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the Lord (Psalm 147:19, 20)!

To be part of the holy lump meant to associate oneself with this holy nation. Even further, the New Covenant believer should understand that their beginnings flow from that which came from Israel. As Jesus taught:

You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews (John 4:22).

It may seem odd that God would pick and preserve one nation through whom salvation (or more specifically, the Savior) would come. But it makes all the sense in the world in terms of the exclusive and unique character and power of who and what a Redeemer would have to be.

If a person has a disease and is sent into a massive hospital which contains the medicine which will cure him, it would be (given the size of the hospital, the alternative ineffective medicines, the ignorance of the patients, etc.) quite possible, even likely, that the patient would never find it or would take the wrong medicine. The same is true of religion. There is one room, one cabinet and one door which must be opened—and that door is Christ. And all of redemptive history points directly to Him.

So the **holiness** *hagia* of the lump or the branches is contingent upon their relationship with the firstfruit or the root. Yet the next verse should grab our attention since it presents this relationship as someone tenuous.

And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches (Romans 11:17-18a).

Broken Off?

Branches broken off? It is a widely held belief (most certainly among Reformed Christians) that true regenerate believers will persevere in the faith.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand (John 10:27, 28).

Yet here we see branches broken off. Even further, we are told that if we do not continue in His “goodness” we “**also will be cut off**” (Romans 11:22). Is the Apostle contradicting himself? Especially after that glorious chapter where we are told that...

...that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38b-39).

No; there is no contradiction, but there is a distinction to be made—without which the Bible becomes a very difficult book to read. And that distinction is between the visible and the invisible church.

Consider the branches that were cut off—the lion’s share of the Israelites. Are we to assume that they were actually believers—regenerate, born again people who stopped believing in Jesus and then were cut off? No, there was no indication that they ever believed. They were the covenant people—a holy people—who honored God “**with their lips but their heart (was) far from (Him)**” (Matthew 15:8). So they found themselves extracted from the people of God—put outside the city gate, as it were—cut off branches.

It is quite common among Christians for us to think we know the heart of our neighbor—who is saved or who is not saved. And

there is certainly a time when the church is called to make a judgment.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matthew 18:17).

Let us not ignore the language our Savior uses. “...let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” *esto soi hosper* or “let be to you as indeed...” That I or the church is to think of him this way carries a great deal of weight, for this is the instruction of Christ—let it not be belittled. Yet at the same time, we must recognize our own limitations, for to know the heart is the prerogative of the Lord and Him alone. “**I the Lord search the heart and test the mind**” (Jeremiah 17:10a).

A Holy Community

So what do we make of this in summary? We have in this observable, material world a holy covenant community. It is a place where the word is preached, sacraments administered, praises sung, prayers offered and promises cherished. In the Old Covenant this community was Israel (Romans 9:4, 5). In the New Covenant this community is the church (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11-13; Matthew 28:19-20). This is to be considered a holy community.

This is part of the argument that I have found difficult for my Baptist friends to grasp. The same word is used to describe the children of at least one believing parent—the children are “**holy**” *hagia* (1 Corinthians 7:14). Should we regard them as actually saved? That seems to be the model the Scriptures give. The members of the holy community are to be considered branches attached to the root unless and until their unbelief is made manifest and they are cut off.

It is within the boundaries of these holy communities that God ordinarily does His work—it is not primarily through television, radio, publishers or para-church organizations. Outside of the church, as our confession teaches, “**there is no ordinary possibility of salvation**” (Acts 2:47). This may sound odd today in a culture where the Christian faith is merely viewed as accessing information for my

own spiritual well-being rather than being part of a body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). But during the writing of this epistle and throughout the history of Christendom, there was no ordinary access to the gospel apart from the church.

Grafted In

Some of the branches (not all, but some of the Jews) were broken off and the **“wild olive tree”** was **“grafted in.”** The covenant community had become corrupt—not entirely, but predominantly. The message of the gospel now extended beyond Israel to the **“highways and byways”** (Matthew 22:9) and those from every nation found themselves at the feast—enjoying the **“fatness of the olive tree.”** This would be the riches of heaven and peace with God through Christ eternally—all the peace, joy and comfort of being a child of the Most High.

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by. I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me. He will send from heaven and save me; he will put to shame him who tramples on me. *Selah* God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness (Psalm 57:1-3)!

Wild olives trees (gentiles) grafted into the already existing flow of that gracious covenant first revealed directly after the fall (Genesis 3:15) and more fully expressed to Noah (Genesis 6:18; 8:20, 21), Abraham (Genesis 12), Moses (Exodus 19-24), David (Psalm 2; Jeremiah 23:5), then reaching its culmination in Christ (1 Corinthians 11:24, 25).

The Apostle thought it was important for the gentile Christian to know at least two things here.

Firstly, that the flow of redemptive history did not begin with them. If anything, they were added as something deemed **“contrary to nature”** (Romans 11:24).

There is a river flowing through history (Ezekiel 47). We are not to seek to change the flow of the river. The river is the source of

life and is bigger than us all—it flows from the lips, body and blood, and resurrection of Christ and it heals the nations. And we are called to make camp on the banks of that river.

And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing (Ezekiel 47:12).

Secondly, they were to know that there was nothing about them that qualified them to be partakers of the fatness of the olive tree. It would seem that they began to view themselves as superior to the branches that had been cut off, for they are cautioned:

...do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you (Romans 11:18).

Do Not Boast

It is worth pointing out that the admonitions in Scripture against boasting are based upon our condition. When we read that we should not boast in our salvation (Ephesians 2:8, 9) it is because we genuinely have no room for boasting. We are saved by grace through faith. It is not as if we can boast but are being encouraged not to boast. No; we *cannot* boast.

We might tell a great athlete that it is unbecoming to boast when interviewed by the press even though we all know that he can legitimately boast—being better than the others. But the call not to boast in Scripture is not a request by God to avoid telling the truth because it might appear unseemly. We are not to boast because the root supports us. We do not support the root.

One might say the root cannot be the Patriarchs or the church or a holy community because it is not the church which supports us but Christ. I do not have time here to address this fully, but in short,

those who truly belong to Christ will never be cut off—and as we have seen that cannot be said of the branches in this passage.

How much more critical is it then—recognizing that the church is called to be that which **“supports”** *bastazeis*—that which provides continuous, prolonged assistance and help by supplying the needs of someone—to make sure that the church truly remains a herald—those who proclaim Christ and Christ alone as the **“hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:2)**. It will be a community where the **“lampstand”** for Christ will shine or a community that will descend into a **“synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:5, 9)**.

I once visited a church in Italy that had angels in the upper corners behind the pulpit looking towards it with a book and quill in hand, as if to record every word that came from the pulpit.

It has been said of the pastoral ministry:

**His throne is the pulpit; he stands in Christ's stead;
his message is the word of God; around him are
immortal souls; the Savior, unseen, is beside him;
the Holy Spirit broods over the congregation;
angels gaze upon the scene, and heaven and hell
await the issue. What associations and what vast
responsibility!**

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss the various illustrations Paul uses and what they stand for. How is one sanctified by the other?
2. Why is it important to understand that salvation is from the Jews?
3. Explain what it means that branches are broken off. Does this mean a Christian can lose their salvation?
4. To what extent should the church determine whether people are Christians?
5. What does it mean to be part of a covenant community? What does it mean that that community is holy?
6. What does it mean that the wild olive tree was grafted in, and what are the implications of this?
7. Why were the wild olive trees cautioned not to boast? What is the root that supports them, and how does it support them?

Romans 11:19-22

The Goodness and Severity of God

January 17, 2016

You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.” Well *said*. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in *His* goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off (Romans 11:19-22).

Introduction

The context in which the above passage sits is one which addresses the faithfulness of God—Paul is answering the accusation that the word of God has “**taken no effect**” or “**failed**” (Romans 9:6). And to say this of the word of God is the same as saying it of God Himself, for His word is an extension of His own being (see Galatians 3:8; Hebrews 4:12, 13).

An Eternal Covenant

God had made glorious and eternal promises to Israel. He had made the promise of a new covenant where He would put His law within them and write it on their hearts. His covenant included a promise that there would be such vast knowledge of Him that no one would need to teach his neighbor or brother “**saying, ‘know the Lord,’ for they shall all know (him) from the least to the greatest**” (Jeremiah 31:34). And the heart of this promise is found in Jeremiah 31:34.

For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:34b).

God emphasized the surety of this promise by comparing it to the certainty of the sun giving light, the fixed order of the moon, the

stars shining in the heavens and the waves of the sea (Jeremiah 31:35). It is a boundless and eternal covenant to Israel.

Thus says the Lord: “If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 31:37).

When you get to the end of measuring the heavens, that is when I will abandon my people—in other words, *never!* Yet the vast majority of Israelites found themselves excluded from the promises of this covenant. The parables of Jesus often revolved around the judgment of those who would have viewed themselves as the recipients of those covenant promises.

When Jesus told the Parable of the Tenants, which resulted in the “**miserable death**” of those who killed the son of the owner, the chief priests and Pharisees “**perceived that He was speaking about them**” (Matthew 21:45). It was in the context of that parable that Jesus taught:

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits (Matthew 21:43).

Taken away?!? But it is an eternal covenant. How can it be taken away? Is God going back on His promise—His covenant? That was the accusation. Some today still think it to be a legitimate accusation.

What Paul is explaining in these three chapters is that the promise is still good—it is a sure promise. It is made to Israel. But “**they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham**” (Romans 9:6, 7). The problem is not the promise or the faithfulness of God to keep His promise. It is a matter of understanding to whom the promise is actually made.

Paul has been laboring to show that God has not cast away His people. He viewed himself as an example of God’s faithfulness—he was an Israelite (Romans 11:1). There was always a remnant of true

Israelites (Romans 11:4). But the true Israelite would be the Israelite of faith.

The Mystery of Jew and Gentile

Add to this that the great mystery (Romans 11:25) of which Paul wrote was that the kingdom of God would include both the faithful Israelite and the faithful gentile.

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Ephesians 3:6).

It may be worth reading the very strong covenantal and political language used by Paul as he expressed the unity of the gentile Christian and Jewish Christian forming one new man (Ephesians 2:15).

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated 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 once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you

are no longer strangers and aliens (*paroikoi*—foreigners), but you are fellow citizens (*sympolitat*⁴⁴) with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:11-22).

It is also worth noting that these words were written to “**the saints who are in Ephesus, and the faithful in Christ Jesus**” (Ephesians 1:1). I mention this so we might see that the letter is not addressed to the temple or the Pharisees or Sadducees or Scribes but to the *church*. In other words, we have a new institution of this new covenant—it is the *church* that is the body of Christ.

Branches Removed

How does this speak to the passage before us this morning? The gentile Christians would have made the observation that branches (the majority of ethnic Israelites) were broken off of the olive tree—removed, as it were, from that covenant community which was now the church. And now they were the ones enjoying the “**fatness of the olive tree**” (Romans 11:17).

They were the ones sitting in church and enjoying the privileges of God’s covenant people—they had the Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26, 27; Romans 8:4), the promise of the resurrection (Ezekiel 37; Romans 8:10, 11), the designation of sonship (Exodus 4:22; Romans 8:14-17), the inheritance (Isaiah 60; Romans 8:17), the promise of never being forsaken (Deuteronomy 31:6; Romans 8:39).

In all of this they began to entertain a notion of personal superiority over the branches which had been cut off (the ethnic Israelites). Paul issues a warning against boasting (Romans 11:18). He now brings it to a much deeper level. He writes of the potential consequences of a haughty disposition.

⁴⁴ The same as in Jeremiah 31:34 (“no longer shall each one teach his neighbor”) where “neighbor” is *politēn*—the same root word.

He begins by addressing what they had rightly surmised:

You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.” Well *said*. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith (Romans 11:19, 20a).

Well Said

The branches were broken off because they did not have faith. We are not told that they lost their faith, but rather that they did not have faith. As discussed last time, this is not an argument against the perseverance of the saints; it is merely addressing a community of outwardly religious people who had no true faith—“**whitewashed tombs...full of dead men’s bones**” (Matthew 23:27). The gentile Christians were accurate thus far.

They were also accurate regarding the means by which they were grafted in—they stood “**by faith**”. But here is where the passage becomes a bit chilling. Branches were broken off due to faithlessness and the wild olive trees were grafted in due to faith. You might think this would be followed by a *halleluiah*—and in some other context it might. But Romans 11:20b says something quite the opposite:

Do not be haughty, but fear (Romans 11:20b).

Fearless Faith

This hardly seems to be the predominant attitude among western evangelicals. We tend to approach the Lord very casually. At the risk of sounding overly critical, it very much appears that we have embraced complacency in our faith. Instead of assurance we have become smug—like a marriage filled with negligence or a household filled with blind assumptions rather than love and care. One or both of the spouses wake up one day having forgotten they were part of a covenant, and the marriage crumbles.

Sadly, we often have no fear of walking close to the edge of the precipice. We flirt with heresy and licentious, sinful behaviors as if there will be no consequences. As one person, who had engaged in egregious sinful behavior which shattered the lives of numerous

people, so carelessly asked me: “Well, there’s grace right?” Like teenagers who want to know how far they can go rather than what is the best and most godly way to conduct a relationship.

There is a healthy fear and an unhealthy fear of God (Matthew 10:28; 1 John 4:18). We see this sometimes with the way kids talk about their dads. Some children will speak of their dads almost bragging about their fear because he’s a big, strong, strict disciplinarian. They’ll say these things with a twinkle in their eye—“He didn’t let us get away with anything!” But there were other kids who didn’t engage in that conversation because their fear was the fear of an abusive dad—not a dad who disciplined but one who vented.

What I fear we are losing in an effort to be relevant is the worship of a God who is irrelevant rather than a God who is to be feared. Perhaps one of the unintended consequences of contemporary worship is a God who becomes a contemporary. Certainly, Jesus said: **“I have called you friends” (John 15:15)**. But you never hear the apostles refer to Jesus that way. No, they generally refer to themselves as **“bondslaves”** or **“servants”**.

Contend For the Faith

I would strongly encourage the brethren to avoid being unnecessarily quarrelsome (Romans 13:13). Yet the docile Christian must equally repent. We are called to **“strive”** *synathlountes* (to struggle together) **“side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27)**; to **“contend for the faith” (Jude 3)**. We are warned that there are those who will **“pervert the grace of our God” (Jude 4)**.

I find myself occasionally in conversations with people who will ask if I think certain churches or people (that I might disagree with on certain doctrinal issues) are still preaching the gospel—*are they still Christians or Christian churches?* I generally say *yes*. This is often followed by a statement along these lines: “If we’re all going to heaven, why argue?” Though I appreciate the sentiment, it must be said that the road to hell is not a cliff. It is a little step here, a little step there.

This short passage is reminiscent of what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. He brought up the example of the natural branches in the wilderness—how they had all been baptized into Moses, ate

spiritual food, drank from the Rock which was Christ, yet God was not pleased with most of them (1 Corinthians 10:1-5).

Paul warns the church not to follow their examples of idolatry, sexual immorality, grumbling dispositions—so many things which lead souls to shipwreck (1 Timothy 1:19) and destruction—leading to the admonition: **“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12).**

In this passage Paul offers a similar caution. Instead of a feeling of superiority over those in darkness, we must recognize that these types of chinks in the armor of the church expose them to a similar fate.

For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in *His* goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off (Romans 11:19-22).

Goodness and Severity

Christians are counseled here to **“consider”** *ide*—literally, to look upon “the goodness and severity of God.” **“Goodness”** *chrestoteta* being His acts of kindness—that which is beneficial to the recipient; **“severity”** *apotomian* being an act of harshness. Perhaps this is another example of his quest to declare **“the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27)**. It has been said:

The kindness of God cannot be truly appreciated as a gift of his grace unless the severity of God is contemplated as the just penalty for forsaking him.⁴⁵

Paul had earlier taught that the **“goodness of God”** leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). And the **“severity”** of God should certainly do the same. This leads us to answer the final and perhaps most difficult question brought forth from this passage: *To what*

⁴⁵ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 608). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

extent should we fear being cut off? Isn't it God's great desire that we be assured of the love He has for us?

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

Are we being encouraged here to doubt—to daily fear that we might be cut off? Does the conditional conjunction “**if**” and the subjunctive “**you continue in His goodness**” (add to this the numerous other conditional statements and warning passages in Scripture—Colossians 1:23; Hebrews 2:1-4; 4:11; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29) necessarily imply the possibility of a truly regenerate believer turning their back on Christ?

Let us seek to answer this while not losing the impact of the warning. First, it has been said that Paul's words are a “**warning, not a prediction.**”⁴⁶ It might be said that in the same way that the gospel is the means by which God saves His elect, these warning passages are the means by which He preserves them.

When my oldest child was barely a toddler, I locked us both out of the car and had to walk about a mile home in a storm. I put her under my jacket and she held my neck. As the rain fell and the wind blew, I instructed her not to let go but hold tight—instructions she gladly obeyed in light of the torrent. Had I given the same warning to some random pedestrian I might not have received the same response. As Jesus taught:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me (John 10:27).

Simply put, the regenerate person will ever (though checkered with weaknesses and failures) heed the call to trust and obey. As Calvin rightly taught: “**It is not indeed enough for thee to have once embraced the favor of God, except thou followest his call through the whole course of thy life.**”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

⁴⁷ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 11:22). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

And yet for the unregenerate, the warning—like the gospel—may very well contain the power to save. It is quite easy and dangerous for members of a church to fall into the same error as the Israelite who assumed a right standing with God by merely being part of a redeemed community. It is not an unhealthy question for us to ask ourselves whether we truly **“stand by faith.”**

And finally, viewing this from a wider context, when there are sufficient numbers in a covenant community who embrace the trappings of religion but deny its content—those who have **“the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5)**—it may very well be that that church (as we have seen with many mainline denominations in past 150 years) is no longer a church at all.

So let us behold the goodness and severity of God that we might ever walk in His goodness.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What is the context of Romans 11:19-22? What is Paul defending?
2. What is a covenant? How long is the covenant? To whom was the covenant made?
3. Did God take away an eternal covenant? Explain.
4. What is the “mystery” that involved the Jew and the Gentile?
5. What does it mean that branches were removed? How did the Gentiles begin responding to this?
6. Discuss fear and the Christian faith. When is fear good? When is it bad? What does good fear produce?
7. Why is important that we contend for the faith?
8. What does it mean to behold the goodness and severity of God and why is it valuable for us to do so?
9. Explain the warning to continue in God’s goodness. Does this mean Christians can lose their salvation? What does it mean?

Romans 11:23-27

God Is Able

January 24, 2016

And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who *are* natural *branches*, be grafted into their own olive tree? For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “*The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins*” (Romans 11:23-27).

Introduction

What we have before us this morning is a hotly debated passage of Scripture. It might be helpful to offer a bit of advice when we are encountered with a text that godly, respectable, Spirit-filled theologians have differing opinions about.

- Charitable
- Assumptions
- Prophecy—Not Proleptic History
- Clear Interprets Unclear

First, we must seek to be charitable toward one another. We should have no desire to vilify people with whom we disagree. There certainly are theological/doctrinal boundaries which must be set, but we should not be overly suspicious. Not every person who has been poorly instructed or poorly instructs is a Pharisee.

Secondly, we must all recognize that our own theological assumptions will yield various results when we engage the Scriptures. We are all fond of saying that we only desire the Bible to have its

way—that it says what it says—no more, no less. In a recent discussion with one of my children who finds herself on the other side of many theological discussions with her classmates, she wondered if she would have embraced those other positions if she had been raised in those churches and sat under those instructors. She made a poignant observation. Let us all be aware of that. Yet if our theological predispositions are constantly at odds with passages in Scripture, we should prayerfully consider altering our views.

Thirdly, we should recognize that prophecy (since it is the uniformed position that the passage before us contains that which is future, at least to the Apostle) is not proleptic history. As Charles Hodges taught, it is not designed to give us the same sort of knowledge of the future which history gives us of the past. Great events are foretold; but the mode of their occurrence, their details and their consequences can only be learned by the event. The prophecies which in hindsight were clearly fulfilled by Christ were not as clear before they actually happened (e.g. that the Savior would be from Bethlehem, Egypt, a Nazarene—Matthew 2:5, 6; 15; 23 was much clearer after those prophecies were fulfilled). I generally find myself unconvinced when modern-day prognosticators point to current events as the fulfillment of prophecy. It is exciting, but may not be terribly sound.

Finally, we should be careful when we conclude, by the reading of a difficult portion of Scripture, that the lessons we learned from simpler passages must be overturned or corrected. It is a very important principle in Bible interpretation that the clear interprets the unclear and not vice-versa.

In verses 23 and 24 Paul, still addressing the temptation to boast, explains what God is capable of doing. Then in verses 25 and 26 he explains what God is doing and will do.

And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who *are* natural *branches*, be grafted into their own olive tree (Romans 11:23-24)?

God is Able

Having been given the warning that the church must ever be governed and inhabited by those who are of faith in Christ—lest they be **“cut off” (Romans 11:22)**, he now begins to show how those who were cut off were not necessarily finally and forever cut off. As discussed earlier, the Israelite (Paul’s fellow countrymen for whom he prayed) had not so entered into a level of reprobation that there was no hope for them—as was the case for some (e.g. Sodom and Gomorrah, see Hebrews 6:4-6; Romans 1:24, 26).

One must wonder if the Apostle donned a hopeful smile (his desire for the salvation of his fellow Jew being so strong—see Romans 9:1-3; 10:1) while writing these words—if they (the Israelite who had rejected Christ) do not continue in unbelief—**“God is able to graft them in again.”** There is something very rich and joyous when a prodigal returns—it makes you want to run and embrace and kiss, and kill the fatted calf (Luke 15:20-23).

Note that Paul’s hope for his fellow Israelite depended not in the power of his friends to come to their senses (though that may have certainly entered the equation at some level), but on the **“power”** *dynatos* of God to graft them in again. Man’s natural condition of unbelief (Romans 3:10-18) can only be overcome by the power of God. Certainly we are all called to do our part. But apart from the power of God, every single word—no matter how true or redemptive—would fall upon deaf ears and stony hearts.

And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

An old friend recently told me that we will never agree on religion or politics. I was not quite as concerned with the politics as with the not-so-veiled assertion that he will never believe in Jesus. Perhaps he is right. Many of us have that same disposition about our

entire culture. Like Abraham who was promised his descendants would outnumber the stars, he hoped against hope that would actually occur (Romans 4:18). But our hope and comfort must always be found in the words **“God is able.”**

Natural Branches

Not only is God able to re-graft the apostate Israelite back into that stream of redemption—the living waters which flow from Christ, **“a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14)**—it would be a much more natural fit. The gentile Christian, after all, was like a **“wild olive”** grafted into that holy root.

Not being raised in the church, I recall as a teenager going to church and finding it all a bit awkward. I didn’t know how to dress; I was unfamiliar with the songs; I didn’t know when to stand or sit or why we did certain things in the liturgy. I didn’t know the stories in the Old Testament like those kids who had been raised in the church. The whole event (that entire season of my life) was very unnatural. All I knew was that I believed the Bible and that Jesus died for my sins.

I think what Paul is saying here is that when the Jew would turn to Christ and enter back into that community full of the hope and promises seen in the Old Testament, he would now know that those promises were fulfilled in Christ.

**For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.
That is why it is through him that we utter our
Amen to God for his glory (2 Corinthians 1:20).**

He would know the liturgy; he would know the promises, better than the gentile Christian. And as a believer, he would now know what it all means; if his fall meant riches for the world, how much more his fullness (Romans 11:12)!

This is what God is able to do. But what was God doing and what will God do? Paul desired his readers to know.

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the

Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins” (Romans 11:25-27).

Two Covenants? Two Peoples of God?

And here the plot thickens! So many differing opinions! What is meant by the “**mystery**” *mysterion*? How should we understand “**in part apo merous...the fullness of the Gentiles to pleroma ton ethnon...And so kai houtos...all Israel pas Israel?**”

The number of opinions regarding these things are far too numerous to address in a single sermon. Suffice it to say that it is precisely here that we see people’s theological assumptions drive their exegesis (sometimes driving it almost mad). If I may, I will briefly suggest some theological boundaries that should not be crossed in our reading of the passage, then finish with what (at least to me) appears to be the most natural reading of the text.

Perhaps the most dangerous, prominent reading of this passage is one which suggests that Israel has maintained its favored status before God—even while rejecting the Messiah. The position is under major modification, but there are/were those who believe in a sort of dual-covenant theology⁴⁸ where the Jew would be saved in a different manner than the gentile.

Others, in a related camp (realizing that a Christ-less Christianity must be rejected) have modified this view in such a way that the Jews will be saved by Christ—but not by evangelism so much as by the immediate presence of Christ. They will behold Him with their eyes at His coming (John 19:37: Revelation 1:7). According to this view, it will be then that Christ will fulfill all the promises—including the land promises—made to Israel.

Briefly stated (for there are many subsets within this understanding), the promises made to Israel have temporarily been

⁴⁸ T.R. Schreiner notes: “Another question that should be answered before investigating these three possibilities is whether the salvation promised is based on faith in Christ. It has become increasingly popular to argue that Paul envisioned salvation for Jews here apart from faith in Christ. Some have espoused a two-covenant theory in which Gentiles are saved by faith in Christ, and Jews by adhering to Torah.”

put on hold while the church age (which focuses mainly on the gentiles—the fullness of the gentiles) takes place. At the conclusion of the church age, God will grant all the promises He made to the ethnic Israelite in a future Millennium—and so “all Israel will be saved.”

Though this schema is virtually invisible if one searches the history of the theology of the church from the fathers of the first and second centuries all through the Reformation and after (from the early councils 200-400AD to about 1830AD), it has become the predominant view in the west in the past hundred years due large to C.I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Charles Ryrie, Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, etc.

It is a very exciting and sensational approach and has yielded an unending stream of novels, movies, conferences and predictions—rabbit trails, perhaps!? I think the natural reading is much less likely to become a blockbuster, albeit much more redemptive. At the risk of saying too much, the Apostle Paul may be dismayed to find that his theology has led untold numbers of hasty predictions rather to where he seemed to focus, which was the taking **“away their sins” (Romans 11:27).**

No, this focus upon ethnic Israel seems to be just the opposite of what he has been writing about for three chapters. And the notion that there is a separate plan and unique promises for a certain segment of believer wars against what he labors in nearly every epistle—that all believers should view themselves as **“one new man” (Ephesians 2:15).**

What God Is Doing

If we stay within the flow of thought already penned by the Apostle, we will not find ourselves jettisoned to the end of the world, or gravitating toward some alternative, secondary method of salvation. We will simply find ourselves given a sound explanation of what God is doing in history.

“Blinding in part has happened to Israel” means that most but not all Israelites have not embraced Jesus. Until Paul’s very day, whenever Moses was read a veil would lie **“over their hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:15).** The **“mystery”** is that God would, through their fall, bring salvation to the Gentiles (Romans 11:11), then through

jealousy (as discussed earlier) some of the Jews would be saved (Romans 11:14).

When we read the phrase **“until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in”** we should not be too quick to view that merely in a temporal sense—as if it ends and then God deals once again with Israel. I heard one popular end-times teacher suggest that God has a specific number of gentiles he is going to save and when that last gentile is saved it will signal time for the rapture (at which time God will again turn His attention to Israel). He then offered the possibility that that gentile might be at his Bible study that night.

When Paul writes that Jesus must reign **“until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Corinthians 15:25)**, he is not teaching that there will be a time when Jesus will no longer reign. So when Paul writes that the blindness has happened to Israel **“until the fullness of Gentiles has come in”** it may be, as Calvin put it, **“...the same thing, as though he had said, “That the fullness of the Gentiles (come in).”⁴⁹**

Now on to the phrase **“And so all Israel will be saved.”** Very respectable theologians disagree on who **“all Israel”** is, so I tread lightly. Some teach that **“all Israel”** here refers to ethnic Jews who believe in Jesus—and that is certainly possible. Others hold that Paul is speaking of all true believers in Christ. The second makes most sense to me for a couple of reasons.

First, as mentioned earlier, Paul has dedicated tireless effort to instill in the hearts of his readers the unity of the body of Christ. I tend to shy away from positions which seem to stratify or unnecessarily diversify the oneness we all share in Christ.

Secondly, and more directly, Paul does not hesitate to identify believers (and only believers) as true descendants of Abraham.

Therefore know that *only* those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” So then those who *are* of faith are blessed with believing Abraham...There is neither Jew nor

⁴⁹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 11:25). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:7-9; 28, 29).

Galatians 6:16 is also persuasive, where the church is called **“The Israel of God.”**

Our final project is to attach the **“and so”** to salvation of **“all Israel.”** Some would understand that as “and then”, that is, in a temporal sense. But “and so” *kai houtos* seldom has that meaning. It more generally means “and thusly” or “in this manner.” When Paul is teaching how those who preach the gospel should earn their living, he gives the example of those Old Covenant servants who worked at the altar and how they would share in the sacrificial offerings (1 Corinthians 9:13). Using the same words (*houtos kai*) he then offers his conclusion: **“In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14).**

We should not view Paul's words here as a shocking divergence from what he has already been teaching. In summary: The majority of the Israelites received not the Messiah—the message then turned to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46)—subsequently, through a sort of jealousy, the Jews would begin to turn back to Christ⁵⁰—and the final outcome would be that all true believers (the true Israel) would be saved. God's word had not failed. He is the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God.

Let us not neglect the heart of this covenant. God would send “The Deliverer” out of Zion. A bit of a New Covenant slant (Isaiah 59:20 has the Deliverer coming to Zion):

By “Zion” Paul refers to the heavenly Jerusalem from which the Lord comes rather than his place of origin, descent from David, or Jesus' death and resurrection in Jerusalem.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Some believe this would be more of a unique revival at the end of history, others believe this would be the normal work of evangelism throughout history.

⁵¹ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 619). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Our naturally ungodly hearts will find themselves overwhelmed by the love, grace and mercy of a God who is able to overcome the most obstinate sinner. And Paul culminates his message with that message which should be a primary component of every gathering of His covenant people—for this is His covenant with us, when He will take away our sins. Let our hearts now fully turn there as we approach the Lord's Table.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How should we navigate through passages of Scripture where godly, respectable, Spirit-filled believers/theologians disagree?
2. Where did the Apostle Paul's hope lie when it came to the salvation of his fellow countrymen?
3. Discuss the natural branches versus the wild olives grafted in. What might be the actual differences between these groups of people?
4. Is it possible that different groups of people may be saved in an entirely different manner? Discuss the notion of two covenants or two peoples of God.
5. What are the various ways people understand what God is doing in history as it relates to Romans 11:25-27? What makes most sense to you and why?

Romans 11:28-32

Beloved, Elect Enemies?

January 31, 2016

Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all (Romans 11:28-32).

Introduction

Years ago, my family took a trip and drove from Los Angeles to New York. While driving through the heartland of America, I remember seeing huge fields of vegetation. My dad said these were farms and we were looking at corn and wheat. But there didn't appear to be any rhyme or reason to these plants—they seemed like wild and random bushes.

As we drove, our car finally reached a point in the road where I could see that the fields were very orderly and meticulously planted; there were perfect rows. The vantage point made all the difference. From one perspective the farm didn't look like it made any sense at all, while from another perspective it made perfect sense.

As we mentioned earlier, there is a principle in Bible interpretation which requires that we interpret the unclear by the clear. The passages in the Scriptures which are difficult to understand should always be read in light of the passage which are easily understood.

In light of the passage (chapter) before us, this principle becomes very important. The Bible, from cover to cover, teaches that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. Any passage which, at first blush, might appear to teach otherwise must be read more carefully. The Bible also teaches that there are some who will be saved and others not. Any passage which sounds as if every last

single person on earth will be saved (the way some might read Romans 11:32, **“that He might have mercy on all”**) must also be read more carefully.

So when we get to a passage like the one before us, what is the vantage point which helps us make sense of what Paul is teaching in light of the clearer teaching of Scripture? Where must we drive our car in order for this passage to display the highest level of orderliness?

Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers (Romans 11:28).

Beloved, Elect Enemies?

Who are these people Paul describes as those who are **“enemies”** *echthroio*, yet at the same time the **“elect”** *eklogen*—or more specifically, **“concerning election beloved for the sake of the fathers”**? One thing we learn from this very passage is that whoever these people are, they will not remain enemies of the gospel—verse 31 teaches us that they will **“obtain mercy.”** That cannot be said of every person on earth, nor can it be said of every Jew in Israel.

I think we will find this passage makes the most sense when we realize that Paul is speaking of a specific group of people within the Jewish community—those who are currently in a state of disbelief but will come to faith. We see this peppered throughout the chapter when he writes of those who are currently in a state of darkness but will know **“fullness” (Romans 11:12)**; those currently **“cast away”** but will later find **“acceptance”** and **“life from the dead” (Romans 11:15)**; branches that were cut off but that God is **“able to graft...in again” (Romans 11:23)**; those who were currently **“disobedient”** but will eventually **“obtain mercy” (Romans 11:31).**

These are people who are within that community who, although they had **“stumbled”**, they had not **“stumbled that they should fall” (Romans 11:11)**. Paul conveys that it was **“For the sake of the fathers”** that this community had not reached the point of no return in their rejection of Christ. They were not a Sodom or Gomorrah (Romans 9:29).

It has been rightly said that God has no grandchildren; that is, we are not saved or regenerated by virtue of the faith of our parents—there is no second generation faith. Yet there is a general promise we see in the Ten Commandments, where God visits the...

...iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands (or, to the thousandth generation) of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:5, 6).

All this to say, it should not be shocking to note that God would exercise forbearance in His judgment upon apostate Israel because of the love and obedience of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or His love for them.

The interesting dynamic here is that Paul is informing the predominantly gentile Christian community that among the very people who are currently making their lives miserable (enemies of the gospel) they will find their future brothers and sisters in Christ.

I recall when I was courting my wife-to-be, being evaluated by her family. I was encountered with a variety of methods by her family members. But a subtext of all of these encounters was the realization that I might be around for a while. So as scrutinizing as they might be, they were careful to avoid bridge-burning—or at least burning the entire bridge.

Paul is warning Christians not to be “boastful” (**Romans 11:20**) or “wise in their own opinion” (**Romans 11:25**). Boastful, self-inflated attitudes create a variety of problems, not the least of which is the difficulty of fellowship when a person with whom we had a haughty encounter comes to faith, and all of the sudden we’re sitting across from them in church. I think it should be a goal of ours that when/if we were to bump into someone at church, there would not be a “what in the world are you doing here” look on their face—no matter where we know that person from.

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

A Faithful God

In this verse, Paul is summarizing what he has been writing for the entire chapter in his treatise on the faithfulness of God (Romans 9:6). **“The gifts *charismata* and the calling *klesis* of God are irrevocable *ametameleta*.”** The gifts may be looking back to Romans 9:4-5 **“adoption, glory, covenants, law, worship, promises, etc”** or looking forward to Romans 12:6-7 to spiritual gifts **“prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, etc.”** The calling is likely referring to God’s effective call to salvation (Romans 8:30).

But the point here is that God does not second-guess Himself, and the passages which sound like He does are merely literary devices to emphasize His dismay or disfavor (Genesis 6:6; Exodus 32:14). No, the totality of God’s covenant promises and its attending grace, mercy and election are **“irrevocable” *ametameleta***, a strong, legal term **“indicating the unbreakable nature of God’s gifts and calling.”**⁵²

God is a promise-making, promise-keeping God. He is the constant, and it is the fickle, unstable, finite and dubious heart of man that is the variable. And as much as we desire to evaluate Him and measure His character, integrity and faithfulness, it is He who is the **“discerner”** of the **“reflections and intentions of the heart”** (Hebrews 4:12).

The bottom line here is that God is faithful—we can be assured of that. But are we faithful? Because God’s faithfulness is a two-edged sword:

The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself (2 Timothy 2:11-13).

God is faithful in His mercy and He is faithful in His justice. And the grand and glorious demonstration of both His mercy and justice are found in Christ. It is because of Jesus that God is both faithful and just when He forgives us and cleanses us **“from all**

⁵² Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 626). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). He is not a God who ignores sin or pretends it did not happen. There are consequences for sin—*wages*—and those wages are paid by Christ. God therefore maintains His justice while being merciful.

Back to the text, what Paul will now show is how we are all in the same boat.

For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all (Romans 11:30-32).

Disobedience and Mercy

He restates what he has been explaining regarding how God has chosen to unfold His plan of redemption. The Israelite rejected the Messiah (John 1:11) and so the message went out to the highways and byways (Matthew 22:9) of the gentiles (the international New Covenant). Then, through the mercy shown to the gentiles, the Jews, through a jealousy (Romans 11:14), would be provoked and find salvation.

Paul’s effort to encourage humility rather than haughtiness is seen in his rather universal declaration of human disobedience—the gentile was in a state of disobedience and now the Jew is in a state of disobedience. As Paul taught elsewhere:

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Galatians 3:22).

There is nothing in any man that makes him preferable to God. This should excite us in our worship—for truly we are saved by grace through faith alone—all glory to God! But it is also a source of great hope for others. If we have emerged from our rebellion by the grace of God, He is certainly capable of achieving that great victory in the hearts of others—even the most hardened sinner, like Paul himself.

Before we conclude, let us note that Paul is about to burst forth into a beautiful doxology: **“Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out” (Romans 11:33)!** And the springboard which launches Paul into this glorious outburst is the same thing which angers the natural mind and even some regenerate minds—that all who are in a state of disobedience and all who are in a state of grace and mercy are precisely where they are because God has **“committed”** *synekleisen* them to it.

The history we all experience, redemptive or otherwise, is not left to chance or the forces of mindless fate. There is a God in heaven who is truly God, governing whatsoever comes to pass—as Paul wrote elsewhere...

...according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will (Ephesians 1:11).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How can our perspective affect the way we read Scripture? What is one of the more important principles in Bible interpretation and why is it so critical?
2. Who are the “beloved, elect enemies” of which Paul writes? Why are they beloved? Does God have spiritual grandchildren? Explain.
3. Have you ever felt awkward seeing someone in church because of the way you treated them outside of the church? What should a goal of ours be when we bump into someone at church?
4. What are the “gifts” and “calling” of God? Does God second-guess Himself; why or why not? What does it mean that God’s gifts and calling are “irrevocable”? What are the implications of this?
5. How does Romans 11:30-31 put everyone, so to speak, in the same boat?
6. Discuss Romans 11:32 and how it leads some to grumble but the Apostle Paul to a doxology.

Romans 11:33-36

His Unsearchable Judgments

February 21, 2016

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?” “Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?” For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:33-36).

Introduction

My wife enjoys hiking. She has done many hikes; some of them were very challenging. Every now and then I’ll join her on one of the less taxing journeys. While hiking, it is important to watch your footwork lest you trip or take a wrong trail and end up walking off the edge of a cliff. But every now and then you hit a place in the trail where it is time to stop and look up—to marvel at the view.

This is one of those places in Paul’s journey. It is as if, in his very own writing, he begins to truly see what he, by the Spirit, has written. And it is time to stop and worship—to burst forth in doxology (glorious saying). It is worth noting that the very things that are troubling to the natural mind and even vexing to some believers (the sovereignty and incomprehensibility of God) detonate praise in the apostle.

Hopefully, it is not an unrealistically ambitious task to get a running start at this doxology by reviewing the three chapters leading up to it. But this is our goal this morning. What has the Apostle Paul been writing for three chapters that culminate in this eruption of praise—and lead into the **“Therefore”** of chapter 12?

A Survey of Romans 9-11

At the risk of going too far back, it must be noted that Romans 9 through 11 answers the natural questions/objections that Romans 8 instigates and Romans 9:6 addresses directly. In Romans 8, Paul

assigns to the church all those blessings of the Old Covenant that were given to Israel (the Holy Spirit, a future resurrection, the designation of being sons and daughters, an inheritance, those who are chosen of God, a promise they will never be forsaken, etc.). In Romans 9:6, we see Paul anticipate and begin to answer the objection: **“But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect” (Romans 9:6).**

This section of Romans does not begin with Paul’s apologetic for the faithfulness of God as much as an expression of his own grief at the wayward condition of his fellow Israelite. Though their crosshairs were at his throat, this entire section must be read in light of the **“great sorrow and continual grief” (Romans 9:2)** in his heart for his **“countrymen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:3).**

This highly doctrinal section of Scripture does not begin with a professor at a chalkboard but with a pastor whose grief and sorrow for the lost—even the lost who sought to inflict him. These were driving influences in his heart and life. As the Psalmist wrote:

My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law (Psalm 119:136).

They had been the covenant people of God—the church of old through whom Christ Himself, according to the flesh, came into the world (Romans 9:1-5). Their hard-heartedness was a source of grief for Paul—a disposition we should imitate. But it doesn’t take long for Paul to begin to explain what they had missed—the distinction of flesh and promise.

Flesh and Promise

The word of God had not failed; they were simply confused about to whom the promises of God were made: **“For they are not all Israel who are of Israel” (Romans 9:6).** Paul places his pointer on things they had read but had somehow missed. Even in the Old Covenant it was always a matter of promise over ethnicity or flesh.

Not every descendant of Abraham was a child of God—Ishmael was a child by flesh, but it was Isaac who was the child of promise, even though he was the younger (Romans 9:6-9). If someone objected that Ishmael was not the son of Sarah, Paul moves

to the next generation. Rebecca and Isaac had twins, but the older would serve the younger. Jacob would be the child of promise and Esau would be hated of God (Romans 9:10-13).

Paul begins to present a level of God’s sovereign election that must have been a source of consternation for his readers—as it continues to be today. God’s decrees—His decisions—are eternal, that is, they are made in eternity past. His choice of Jacob over Esau was before they were born, before they had done good or evil, that the **“purpose of God according to election might stand” (Romans 9:11)**. In this teaching, Paul anticipates the natural objection.

The Natural Objection

“Is there unrighteousness with God” (Romans 9:14)? Paul again answers this objection with words from the Old Testament with which they should have been familiar, describing when God had explained to Moses His prerogative to place His compassion and mercy where He saw fit—that in an ultimate sense it does not depend on him who wills or runs but on God (Romans 9:15, 16).

Seeking to further enhance their appreciation of the sovereignty of God, the Apostle will now will teach that the sovereign choices of God extend beyond the covenant people—even to the very pagan leaders who would oppress them—even to Pharaoh (Romans 9:14-18)!

Solomon wrote:

The king’s heart *is* in the hand of the Lord, *like* the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes (Proverbs 21:1).

Later, I came upon the words of the Psalmist:

The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man; from where he sits enthroned he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds (Psalm 33:13, 14).

Paul continues to anticipate an objection—an objection that would only come from those who actually understood the implications of what he had been teaching—an objection many of us have heard a thousand times.

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will” (Romans 9:19)?

And here, as if to remind us that we are creatures, compares us to pots and Himself to the potter (Romans 9:20-24). It has been said that man, made in the image of God, is God’s most glorious creative achievement—nothing in all of creation compares—not the stars, the sun, the moon or the seas; it is man who is fearfully and wonderfully made. But we must ever be reminded that we are still the creature and not the Creator. It is when men forget this truth that theological, political, moral, cultural disaster ensues.

Extending the Borders

Paul then moves from a discussion of God’s sovereign freedom and election to what God had said He would do. In Romans 9:25-29 Paul reminds his readers that it was always God’s plan to extend redemption beyond the borders of Israel. People who were not His people would be called His people. It would only be a remnant of the Israelites who would be saved. They should never have thought themselves inherently superior to other people—had it not been for God promise to bring the seed (Christ) through them, they would have ended up like Sodom and Gomorrah (Romans 9:29).

At the end of chapter nine, he begins to hit on the critical issue of the **“righteousness of faith” (Romans 9:30)**. The big problem, the problem which to this day separates the Christian faith from all other pursuits of God, is that righteousness comes not by works but by faith—faith in Christ. Christ had become a stumbling stone and rock of offense. But to some—to those who believe—He would become the means by which they would never be put to shame (Romans 9:30-33).

Paul's Prayer

In chapter ten, we are again reminded of Paul's desire and prayer that Israel be saved. They were zealous but ignorant. Like men tend to do, they wanted to establish their own righteousness rather than submit to the righteousness of God. They did not grasp that the purpose of the law was Christ (Romans 10:1-4).

Paul informs his readers that it was Christ who ascended to heaven and descended to the abyss—there is no need to look further. All that is needed for our redemption has been fulfilled in Him (Romans 10:5-9). We are simply called to believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead and confess His lordship that we might be saved. God is not a respecter of persons—whoever calls on His name shall be saved. Our job is to send preachers to preach the gospel of peace (Romans 10:8-15).

Faith comes by hearing, but not everyone who hears will necessarily believe. Paul begins to teach that though Israel had heard the news they were a **“disobedient and contrary people” (Romans 10:21)**. But did this mean that God had **“cast away His people” (Romans 11:1)**? Paul begins to address this in chapter 11.

His People

In chapter 11, Paul uses himself as an example of God's faithfulness. He was a Jew and he had not been cast away. During the time of Elijah and even during Paul's present time there was a remnant of those who were truly God's elect (Romans 11:5)—those whom He foreknew (Romans 11:2). They were children of promise, not merely flesh, **“otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Romans 11:1-6)**.

Paul once again appeals to the sovereignty of God in both opening and closing eyes and ears (Romans 11:7-10), giving **“a spirit of support” (Romans 11:8)**.

Jealousy

In the middle of chapter 11, Paul explains that the apostasy of Israel was not to the level of reprobation—they had not stumbled that they should fall. There was hope for them. Salvation coming to the

gentiles would provoke a jealousy in them that some might be saved (Romans 11:11-15).

Paul warns the gentile Christians not to be boastful. They are included by grace through faith and it would be very natural for God to bring Israelites back into covenant with Him. When churches forget their need for grace, they may find themselves cut off (Romans 11:16-22). We must ever consider the **“goodness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22)**.

God is Able

Paul goes on to explain in Romans 11:23-32 that God is able to graft the Israelite back into covenant with Him if they do not continue in unbelief. Israel’s blindness was never full or final. They were blinded in order that the Gentiles would be brought in; through jealousy the natural branches would be re-grafted and **“so all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26)**.

God is the one who commits to disobedience and obedience in order for Him to display His mercy on all who are His. He is faithful to His covenant. Sometimes we think things should unfold a certain way. We try to make sense of the way life goes and from our creaturely perspective we come up short.

Unsearchable yet Glorious

God’s plan of redemption is according to His infinite power, glory and wisdom. Our minds cannot plumb its depth nor can we in any sense improve upon it or require some sort of recompense or remuneration.

Sometimes you see artists on stage painting a picture to music. The strokes seem random, even reckless. It is sometimes difficult to tell what they are painting. Once, I saw one of these paintings that, even when it was done, I could not make out. Then the artist turned it over and one could see that it was a beautiful portrait that had been painted upside down.

Then it is as if that artist freely hands the work to some unworthy, skeptical—even critical member of the audience. This is the great menagerie of redemption. And Paul finishes with a doxology—a doxology which accentuates the incomprehensibility of

God's wisdom, His judgments and His grace; a doxology in which we are called to appreciate the centrality of His being.

It is lamentable that the things people might admire and extol in other people are the very things that the natural man clamors about when they are assigned to God.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out (Romans 11:33)!

If we were to sit in a room with an Augustine, an Aquinas, an Edwards, an Einstein or a Hawking we might admire their top-shelf discussions as we sat silently in the corner on the floor—knowing that in a thousand lifetimes, if we held a hundred degrees from fifty institutions of higher learning, our minds would still come up short compared to theirs. Yet it is in the nature of man to shake his fist at a God who, though He condescended to become a man that He might save us, remains...

...infinite in being, (Exod. 3:14, Job 11:7–9) glory, (Acts 7:2) blessedness, (1 Tim. 6:15) and perfection; (Matt. 5:48) all-sufficient, (Gen. 17:1) eternal, (Ps. 90:2) unchangeable, (Mal. 3:6, James 1:17) incomprehensible, (1 Kings 8:27) every where present, (Ps. 139:1–13) almighty, (Rev. 4:8) knowing all things, (Heb. 4:13, Ps. 147:5) most wise, (Rom. 16:27) most holy, (Isa. 6:3, Rev. 15:4) most just, (Deut. 32:4) most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. (Exod. 34:6)⁵³

It angers the natural mind to bow before His Maker, but for Paul it generated doxology.

“For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?” “Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him” (Romans 11:34, 35)?

⁵³ *The Westminster Larger Catechism: With Scripture Proofs.* (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

We tend to view Romans 9 through 11 as containing flagship passages for Calvinism and eschatology (especially as it relates to Israel); and these chapters certainly address those issues. But they are mere sub-points. What Paul has labored through these (and truly all) chapters can be summed up in verse 35, and that is we simply have nothing to offer God that He should repay us.

We cannot plead our ethnicity, our wisdom, our humility, our goodness, our self-control, our brokenness, or even our ability to make a right choice. The creature is entirely at the mercy of the Creator. Again, this is something that angers the desired autonomy of the natural man whose **“pride serves as their necklace...(who) speak loftily (and) set their mouths against the heavens” (Psalm 73:6, 8, 9)**. All we offer to the equation of redemption is our sin. And, as if in crescendo, prior to the **“Therefore”** of chapter twelve, Paul nudges us just one step closer to that vantage point which helps us make sense of the human experience.

For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:36).

All things come **from** (*ek*) Him and **through** (*dia*) Him. There was nothing, and He made everything. As John wrote elsewhere:

All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made (John 1:3).

And all things are directed to Him—**“to whom be the glory forever.”** This is the perspective by which all things must be observed. *The chief end of all things is the glory of God.* Again, the natural man endlessly wrangles against this, but Paul rejoices, as should we—keeping in mind what Paul had written elsewhere—words for our hearts to ponder as we prepare for the Table of the Lord this mornning.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all

things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What did the Apostle do from time to time as he contemplated the very words given to him by God?
2. Have you noticed that those things which are troubling to the natural mind are glorious to believers? Explain.
3. What do Romans 8 and Romans 9:6 tell us about why Paul is writing chapters 9 through 11?
4. How does Paul begin this section? What do we learn? What are ways we can respond more appropriately to our surroundings?
5. What points does the Apostle Paul make in regard to flesh versus promise?
6. What is the natural objection to a solid presentation of God's sovereignty, and how does Paul answer the objection?
7. What was God's ultimate plan regarding redemption? What disposition must people be mindful of? What critical issue does Paul mention in Roman 9:30?
8. What was Paul's desire for Israel? What was the error they had fallen into?
9. How does Paul answer the accusation that God had forsaken His people? Explain the interaction between the Jews and Gentiles regarding how God would save (blinding, jealousy, etc.).
10. Explain how the very things which offend the natural mind are a source of joy and glory to the Apostle Paul.
11. What do we have to offer God? What vantage point makes sense of the human experience? How is this glorious?

