

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Letter to the Romans

Readings: *Romans 9:1-11:36*

Reflections:

- Regarding the Jewish Experience – Concern for Jewish heritage: Paul models his own Christ-like heart as he wishes he could die so that his own Jewish sisters and brothers could be saved. They were the first to taste this vision of being adopted as God's children, the glory of God's presence, the security of having a covenanted relationship, the place of connection with God through the temple, and the insights of the principles captured in the Torah. They were privileged in many ways but they lacked the ability to turn that opportunity into reality. They did not fully seek out to be filled with the Spirit as a result they were not changed from the inside out.
- Basis of God's promise: Paul now makes a very important statement we must grasp to understand his theology moving forward. "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." What does this mean? In other words, not everyone who is genetically an Israelite is truly an Israelite in their heart and relationship with God. Paul walks through the story line of how not all of Abraham's descendents were equal participants in the promise of blessing. In other words, the true descendents of Abraham are not those who claim him as a genetic ancestor but rather those who in their own faltering way are learning to walk by faith. A few of the Old Testament quotes Paul uses (See Genesis 21:12; 18:10, 14; 25:23; Malachi 1:2-3) in this section are worth discussion. First, Genesis 25:23 ("The older will serve the younger.") captures an overall principle of God's upside down approach to his rescue mission. He loves to use the foolish, the weak, the younger, and the vulnerable to accomplish his purposes. Again God is the God of humility, not a God of pride. Second, Malachi 1:2-3 ("Jacob I loved, Esau I hated." – See notes on October 5) is not a statement about blind national loyalty by God but rather again should be taken in more spiritually representative terms. As we saw with Jesus and within the story of Israel, God's heart is for all people. The difference between Jacob and Esau was that Jacob represented this very flawed people who still wrestled with God until they were broken and Esau represented a people who would despise God's grace to them. God saw all of this coming and he made it clear that he was in control. This is not to eliminate human participation or choices but rather to say that the will of God will be done.

- God can have mercy on anyone: Paul continues this theme as he quotes Exodus 33:19 and 9:16. The story of Pharaoh as recorded in Exodus makes it clear that we can't prejudge God's wisdom. He alone knows the human heart and he alone decides who will receive his mercy and who will be hardened by their own ongoing commitment to sin.
- Man cannot limit God's grace: This entire passage simply argues one simple point. Who are we to judge God for his decisions either for judgment or mercy? God's grace extends to both Jews and Gentiles and as we see in the story of Israel, to many of the most unlikely people.
- Prophets told of grace: Paul now quotes many of the prophets after quoting from the Torah (Hosea 2:23, 1:10, Isaiah 10:22-23; 1:9). These verses highlight the radical grace of God and his commitment to surprise humanity by loving the unlovable, the rejected and outcasts. We must remember that Israel was not chosen as God's people because of how wonderful and amazing they were but because of their weakness and frailty.
- Jews did not see grace: Paul now points out the obvious shocker in the story of Jesus and his new community. Israel, after having a leg up and a head start, missed the point. Rather than pursuing God by faith and seeking to have a true friendship with God based on trust, they turned relating to God into a huge long list of rules. Gentiles who were the late comers got the message and were jumping into a relationship with God. Now Paul quotes one of the favorite verses of the New Testament writers, Isaiah 8:14; 28:16. This statement points to the upside down nature of God's work that completely surprises people as he causes the proud to stumble yet those who trust in him become truly secure and never have to fear shame. Jesus is the one who frees the humble from the curse of the fall ("I was afraid because I was naked and so I hid." – my vulnerability becomes a reason to hide true self) and restores us to true freedom in our intimacy with God ("naked and unashamed" – my vulnerability becomes the basis or starting point for true intimacy in relationships).
- Jews tried to earn salvation: Paul restates his desire for his own people and yet makes it clear that they were zealous, not for God's righteousness but for creating their own version of religious righteousness. This is the deception of religion that we can create righteousness by figuring it all out, creating a system that orders our external world and ensures we and others do the right thing. At the core of this religious righteousness (which is no righteousness at all) is ultimately our own desire to save ourselves and be our own rescuers. Religious sin is just as self-centered as moral sin. This is why Paul concludes with one of his great irreligious statements: "Christ is the end of the law (religion) so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes (simply trusts God)."
- Salvation for all: This passage may not immediately be easy to grasp. Paul begins by pointing out the "Do this!" approach to righteousness in the Torah. If you just look at the surface of the Law and don't look past the precept to see the principles, you will make righteousness one huge "to do list". Paul then goes on to say that righteousness is not something to be externally pursued. We don't need to climb up a stairway to heaven because Christ is the one who came down from heaven to save us or digging ourselves out of a ditch because

Christ has already risen from the dead and taken us with him. This righteousness works in us from the inside out starting with the heart: "The word (God's revelation that brings life) is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart." (Deuteronomy 30:14). In other words, the entire point of the Torah was to have it internalized. That was God's vision from the start. Paul's point is to make the connection between the vision of the Torah and what is proclaimed in Jesus' name: "the word of faith we are proclaiming: that if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe with your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified (it starts internally) and with your mouth you confess (works its way out to external expressions) and are saved (experience God's inside out transformation)." The internal needs external expression to be real but it must start on the inside to be sustained as real. Paul now quotes Isaiah 28:16 and Joel 2:32 to affirm again that this invitation is open to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. God wanted to make it so that everyone has the free opportunity to respond.

- Gospel produces faith: Paul now gives us again a critical insight into how this inside out transformation works. The Spirit comes into a person's life who is seeking God in faith. Yet, how does faith come with the heart to start the process of seeking to be filled by the Spirit and in turn experience the power of God's love? Paul breaks it down logically. You can't believe the truth unless you hear the truth and you can't hear the truth unless someone tells you. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." When God speaks to our hearts and we hear his truth then we start to trust him. This word of Christ is the message of Jesus that is directed into our hearts by the Spirit of God. The word of Christ could also be translated "the anointed word" which would emphasize the work of the Spirit to communicate that truth to our hearts. When we know God is speaking right to us and we feel the reality and conviction that he knows us and loves us and communicating his heart and truth to us, then we start to trust him. We see why it is so important for Christ-followers to be open to allowing God to speak through us. It isn't some memorized script about Jesus that people need to hear from us. They need to hear God speaking through us and this happens best when we fully embrace the message of Jesus and then are open to allowing God to use us and to speak through us. Sometimes this communication of God's heart comes through great teaching and sometimes it comes through personal prayer times when God gives one person a message for another person. Sometimes it happens when people simply read the Bible. In each situation, it is God's Spirit using a person or the Scriptures to communicate his heart in a personalized way. Then the person receiving the word knows deep inside that God loves them and is speaking to them. The one confirming truth about all of these messages is that God will always speak in a way that points people towards Jesus and simply trusting him alone.
- Israel rejected preaching: Paul again quotes a number of passages (Psalm 19:4; Deuteronomy 32:21; Isaiah 65:1-2) to underscore that God was speaking to Israel but they consistently rejected listening to what he was saying. God was reaching out consistently but Israel's heart was hard and rebellious.

- Always a faithful remnant: So did this result in God rejecting the Israelites? Paul responds to the heckler again by declaring clearly that God did not reject Israel. He uses the story of Elijah (1 Kings 19:10-18) to illustrate how it is always a minority movement that responds to God. There is always a remnant that seeks God and so even in Israel there are those who live as true descendents of Abraham, not just genetically but more importantly as people of faith and grace. Paul now states the obvious, grace and work are two fundamentally different approaches to God. Some manuscripts state: "And if by grace, then it is no longer works; if it were then grace would no longer be grace." Other manuscripts provide this variant; "works would no longer be works." What is important is that readers understand that works and grace are not compatible approaches to God.
- Unrighteous blinded to truth: The Israelites sought righteousness but was looking to achieve it the wrong way. As we reflect on the history of Israel, they were continuously rebelling against God and seeking to appear righteous yet always worshipping the gods of the nations around them and oppressing the poor. This is why they came under God's judgment. Paul points out that God even states this in the Torah (Deuteronomy 29:4) as well as repeats it through the Prophets (Isaiah 29:10). He also quotes a passage from David in Psalm 69:22-23 to note how Israel basically came under the judgment of an enemy of God. Now again this is not every person of Israel as some responded by faith. God knew this would be the case and he chose (the elected) to offer his salvation and blessing to those who live humble lives and truly walk by faith. So even in Paul's day the majority of the Jews rejected the message of Jesus but a minority responded with faith. This is an important message for the Roman Christians to hear because they had experienced this is a significant way as the Roman Jews by and large had persecuted them until almost all the Jews had been driven out of Rome leaving the church with mostly Gentile Christ-followers.
- Jews brought grace to the Gentiles: Paul now summarizes one of the key elements of the overarching story of God. Israel blew it. Does that mean they are completely useless now? No, Israel was the example of "what doesn't work to change the human heart" but even so, God used them as the people from whom the Messiah would come and reveal "what does work to change the human heart and restore intimate friendship with God." Even though they sinned, they were still an important part of the story and God still had a plan for them. As the Gentiles come to faith, the hope is that Jews would become envious and would be spurred on to truly seek a restored relationship with God through faith. If the world was blessed because Israel was great case study of "what doesn't work," how much more will be the blessing (riches) for those Israelites who respond in faith to Christ? Paul makes it clear that Gentiles should never gloat or judge the Jews but rather hold them with respect and hope they will return to Christ and experience the higher blessing.
- Gentiles may win back Jews: Paul now restates all of this and points out that this is why he is an apostle to the Gentiles. He is hoping to arouse his own people to envy and desire that kind of life, security and freedom that Christ-followers enjoy. If they accept Christ, again how much more is their blessing!

- Gentiles not to boast: Paul now uses the image of an olive tree. Israel was often compared to a fruit-bearing tree or vine throughout the Old Testament. Here Paul paints the picture of a tree that has been pruned back because of failing to bear fruit and a wild branch, the Gentiles, being grafted in. The key is bearing the fruit of faith and love. Paul uses the word “kindness” here to describe a humble form of loving others. God is demonstrating his kindness by welcoming in the Gentiles but they must also be aware of God’s sternness that does not associate with those who are harsh, judgmental and religiously proud. If after being grafted into Israel’s spiritual heritage they choose to judge Israel and be proud, they will suffer the same judgment from God that Israel did. They would be making it clear to God that they don’t get God’s heart. God is a God of humility and kindness to the weak and struggling. When we reject God’s heart, we reject him and as a result will be cut off from him.
- Grace extends to all: Paul now makes a statement that has caused scholars to debate for centuries. “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.” Paul is helping the Gentiles catch a vision for how God still is working to save Israel and although they have been hardened, God’s desire is still to fulfill his covenant with them and bring salvation to them. The question is who is “all Israel?” Is this the entire ethnic Israel? Will every Jew be saved at some point? Some Christians have maintained this. It seems more likely that Paul is referring here to the true Israel of God, those spiritual descendants of Abraham who live by faith. Israel has been hardened until enough Gentiles have come into the kingdom that Israel will be provoked to respond in faith. Paul goes on to say that basically the tables have turned and they will turn again. Once Israel was blessed and the nations were outside that blessing and looking in on the promises of God. Now the Gentiles are experiencing blessing and Israel because of their religious sin are on the outside looking in on the promises of God through Jesus. Yet, God’s heart is to give people over to their sin until they are sick of it. Like the prodigal son or older brother, they get their fill of their own sin and then hopefully come to their senses and want to leave their sin and join into the party the Father is throwing. God doesn’t bind people over to disobedience to destroy them but rather he binds them to their sin until they wake up. It is similar to church discipline that will cut off relationship to help people come to their senses and turn back to God.
- Song of praise: Paul now again quotes Old Testament passages (Isaiah 40:13 and Job 41:11) in affirming the unsearchable wisdom of God. This reads like a song and it is possible that this captures a song that the Christians sang in their groups. Or it may be a bit of creative writing on Paul’s part. In either case it affirms again how as we consider the mercy and wisdom of God we are brought to humble praise and worship! God’s ways are not our ways. God’s ways are so much higher!