

St. Paul's Letter to the Romans

Collect for Epiphany

O God, who by the leading of a star manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: mercifully grant that we, who know you now by faith, may at last behold your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

Inclusivity and Exclusivity

We are now entering into the next section of the letter. 9:1-11:36 is a section that has continued to be used and misused by individuals and communities of faith to elevate their own status or to demean others. The questions raised and the natural extension of the argument made by St. Paul in his including the gentiles as part of God's People.

We will see how his ideas are in fact not new at all, but the central issue still needs to be addressed. If the Gentiles are included in the Salvation promised by God to His people, because they accept Jesus as the Messiah, what happens to the Jews who do not?

Has God failed to keep His promise to the Jews? This problem is real and something we can see reflected in the headlines today. Has God rejected the Jews, because they did not accept Jesus as the Messiah? Was this the cause of the Holocaust? Is this why there is unrest in the Middle East? Is this why the Temple was lost first to the pagan Romans and then to the Muslims?

All these questions and more can be heard repeated and discussed in many religious circles. It brings us back to the important question of what did St. Paul say and what did he mean?

Romans 9:1-5

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 brethren, my kinsmen by race. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen.

I. Paul's Protest – He is deeply concerned with Jews who have lost their birthright

- A. Paul opening of this section of the letter reminds us of the protest he made concerning his unconcern over the Roman Christians
- B. He says he can't conceive of anything worse than being separated from Christ
- C. He underscores his concern by suggesting that we would separate himself from Christ if it would allow the Jews who have not accepted Jesus as Lord to do so

II. Paul lists the Privileges of Israel

- A. The Name Israelites given by God and bestowed upon Jacob
- B. Divine Filiation –(being sons of God)
- C. God's manifestation to Israel
- D. The presence of God's Glory with Israel
- E. The Covenant – repeatedly renewed
- F. The Law
- G. The Temple Cult – That they could make acceptable sacrifice to God
- H. Paul adds to the usual list – The Patriarchs, whose story he will use to instruct us

How Paul will do this is to read the O.T. not as a Jew would read and interpret, but as a Christian. This is what we do today as we read the O.T.

Romans 9:6-13

But it is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants. For this is what the promise said, "About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son." And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, she was told, "The elder will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

I. Has God Promise failed is the question to be answered

A. How God has selected His people and how He has made Promises to them – Issac

1. God did what was impossible to give Isaac to Abraham and Sarah
2. Paul next divides the issue of son-ship and national affiliation
 - a. The promise of God is made to Abraham and his seed forever

Remember that Abraham is not a Jew when he is deemed righteous by God. He has neither the covenant nor the Law when God reckoned him as righteous.

- b. We also need to note that Paul does not identify the Abraham/Issac line with any group – Jews or Gentiles

B. How God has selected His people and how He has made Promises to them – Jacob and Esau

1. Before the twins were born God determined that the older would serve the younger
2. The boys had neither done good or bad – human acts (work) have no effect upon the creative power of God (God calling into existence and ordering)

Romans 9:14-18

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills.

I. How God has selected His people and how He has made Promises to them – Moses

- A. God has total freedom of action regardless of human actions or conditions
- B. The Egyptian Exodus – Moses and Pharaoh

1. In the case of Moses we see God's Mercy begin revealed
2. An irony to this situation is that Moses is the very symbol of the Law, but he receives God's Mercy and through him Israel receives God's Mercy before the Law is given

C. Pharaoh is a tool to reveal God's Power and to make His name known in all the world.

We might ask several questions concerning this event: Why did Pharaoh just not relent and let Israel go? Why did he even pursue Israel after he let them go? It does appear that he is acting in a fashion completely contrary to human reason or logic.

1. Pharaoh's heart is hardened and he becomes an instrument of God
2. Paul will later (11:7, 25) use the same language to note the attitude of the Jews that reject the Messiah
3. All this is to set the stage to explain the nature of Divine Freedom and how that relates to Hardening Hearts or showing Mercy

D. The Issue of the freedom of God as the Creator – The potter and the clay

1. Paul is again referring to the O.T.

Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the LORD came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? says the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: `Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Return, everyone from his evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.'

2. This answer is incomplete and leaves us stating that we are not clay, but people

Romans 9:19-21

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me thus?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?

I. Paul's final answer is to remind us a basic Biblical Dogma from the Book of Job

God is God and we are creatures. God actions towards us may seem arbitrary or even cruel, but He is God and will in the end give us what we need and fulfill His plan for us. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord.

Romans 9:22-29

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'my beloved.'" "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved; for the Lord will execute his sentence upon the earth with rigor and dispatch." And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us children, we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomor'rah."

How God has selected His people and how He has made Promises to them as a group of people

I. This is the question of who God considers to be His People and who is not

II. The Complete Freedom of God to act is being stated in a new way

II. God is now doing not a new thing, but what He said he would do

A. Paul uses the prophets to make this point

B. There is also the slow and deliberate nature that we are to understand begins by showing that God first chose people to be his people. And also rejected others

III. The Vessels of Wrath

- A. Paul does not immediately identify who is a vessel of God's Wrath (People or Nation as a group)
- B. Rather the vessels of wrath are those individually subject to punishment because of their acts. (They are according to Paul in the Greek translation ripe for destruction)
- C. That they have not already been destroyed is for two purposes
 - 1. To make known God's Power – He did not destroy Pharaoh at the first resistance
 - 2. To display His Wrath – the continuous reaction to Pharaoh's acts caused the hardening of his heart to continue and the continuation of the trials – which led more people to know and believe in the power of God
- D. It now becomes clear that those Jews who have denied the Christ are part of those ripe for destruction – only God's patience stands between them and the final judgment.

This image is again not new. Jewish Apocalyptic Literature contains many references to the destruction of those who are not of the People of God – the turn is that now Paul has included Jews in those who are not the people of God.

IV. Vessels of Mercy

- A. This is the missed community of the Christian Faith
- B. The community was known and prepared beforehand by God to be the vessel of His Mercy – (Not by their own actions does the Christian Community become a vessel of mercy)
- C. The mixed nature of the community does not represent a failure of God's plan rather a fulfillment of it.

"For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. And they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their cereal offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD. "For as the new heavens and the new earth

which I will make shall remain before me, says the LORD; so shall your descendants and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the LORD. "And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh." Isaiah 66:18-24

The importance for us to understand is that Paul is clearly pointing out the failure of Israel to recognize the Messiah. He notes that their actions place them in danger of being destroyed, but also notes that they are not necessarily to blame. Rather the issue to consider how the present failure of the Jews to accept the Messiah will be used for the greater Glory of God as the Father gathers all His children in the future. The nature of God is Love and to be Merciful this will be the final word of God.