

Prayer

We praise You, Lord God for freedom, and for all that it means to be saved by the grace from sin and its consequences! We praise You for liberty from death and the hope of New Life, we praise You for a sure hope for the future and for the encouragement this gives, and we praise You for deliverance and the defeat of all evil won by Christ on the Cross. We praise You forever, because You have done all things well!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Missions

Pray for the Lord's blessing on any mission being planned or done by your church or in your city or region. Pray that the Lord will work by the power of His Spirit to save the lost

On-going prayers

- *Pray about the issue of worldwide financial regulation*
- *Give thanks for the blessing of eternal life in Christ*
- *Pray about the way waste is managed in your country*

Meditation

When the enemy finds our faults and failings
And tries every way to hold us down;
 May we be strong and sure, in conviction and faith.

When the events of our day turn from good to bad,
Shattering all our hopes and dreams;
 May we grasp Your providence, guidance and care.

When the people we work with turn sharply against us,
Manipulating everything said and done;
 May we stay pure, in thought and word and deed.

When the passage of time yields no healing or hope
As our prayers remain unanswered;
 May we accept that Your will lies beyond us, for now.

When the rest for which we long lies too far away
And we do not know how to keep going;
 May we refuse to panic, and find our peace in You.

For with You, 'all things work together for good'.

Bible Study - Romans 9:1-5

¹ I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie; my conscience supports me by the Holy Spirit, ² that I have great sorrow and unending pain in my heart. ³ For I wish it could be that I was accursed and cut off from Christ myself, for the sake of my own people, my naturally born relatives, ⁴ the Israelites. They possess the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the rites of worship, and the promises; ⁵ they have the patriarchs, and from them, the Messiah, according to human ancestry, who is God over all things; blessed for ever: Amen!

Review

The wonderful ending of Chapter 8 of Romans declares the eternal truth that 'nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus'. This sounds as if it could be the conclusion of the letter, if it were not obvious that we are only half-way through Paul's 16 chapter epistle! In truth, Paul wrote this letter carrying a very heavy burden on his heart; he was a Jew, and his arguments about the Gospel stood in complete contrast to the official beliefs of the Jewish people of his day. Many Jews felt that by advocating Christ, he was denying the special promises made by God to the Jewish people. Our passage focuses on Paul's deep anguish about the fact that his own people and heritage were outside the scope of the Gospel he so boldly

proclaimed. Had the Jewish people placed themselves outside of God's love and care by their rejection of the Messiah?

We read this passage today with sadness, for Jews were queuing up to condemn Paul's teaching (e.g. see Acts 21:17f.) and denounce him as a heretic. However, we do not seem to be affected by this issue today, because most Christians do not meet many Jewish Christians (although there are many), and it is easy for us to read what Paul says here as if it is merely an issue from the past. Certainly, we do not hear much preaching nowadays about the eternal future of the Jewish people from Romans 9-11. However, within our passage today and the three chapters we are about to study, Paul agonises about this and this results in the revelation of some important truths about the Gospel.

The issue is this; if the Jews have cut themselves off from the Gospel, what has happened to God's Old Testament promises? Earlier in this letter, Paul wrote about the sinfulness of all, Jews and Gentiles, before the righteousness of God (Romans 3:21f.), which began his explanation of the Gospel (3:21-17). However, although he condemned Jews for judging others (2:17f.) he also claimed that Jews had 'advantages' (3:1f.) before God. He did not say what these were at the time, but here in this passage we find out what these were. Speaking somewhat emotionally because of his attachment to his own people (9:1-3), he identifies these advantages as the great heritage of God's revelation through the Forefathers, the glory of the Exodus and the giving of the Law, the building of the Temple (9:5), and the Messiah Himself, who was descended from David, and much more. Surely this heritage had value?

Paul's concern was that the heritage of God's Old Testament people should not be lost now that the Jewish people had so painfully rejected the Messiah. Moreover, this raises the question of God's faithfulness; how can people trust God if He once promised to be faithful to the Jews but He now abandons them because of their rejection of Christ? Is God unfaithful or inconsistent? The Gospel is surely in question unless we can explain how God is faithful both to the Church and to the people of Israel as well.

Romans 9-11 is all about this difficult conundrum. Characteristically, he is unwilling to give ground on any Gospel principle, but he is acutely aware of the difficulties faced by his fellow Jews, and this clearly affected Paul very deeply. Over the next three chapters, Paul explains that God has a special plan for the Jews that will become known only when Jesus comes again in glory at the end of time (see 11:25f.). He also wants all God's people to know that this will happen, and his teaching is based upon his utter confidence in God's faithfulness, and his faith in the fulfilment of all the Old Testament promises of God.

We are fundamentally mistaken if we think that the Gospel of Jesus Christ discards God's past promises to the Jewish people (see Matt 5:17f.) or, for that matter, to all people. In addition, we will find that as Paul writes about this, he reveals yet more about the Gospel that is of great importance. As so often, as Paul deals with a problem, he reveals greater truths.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Paul's personal pain (9:1,2,3)
- The benefits of the Israelites (9:4,5)

Going Deeper

Paul began his answer to this question with an emotional response, asking if he might be allowed to take the place of his own people before God (9:3)! But his pain was not simply concern for the Jews, it was for the Gospel, and as we study this and the following texts, we will find that Paul searched for every possible way to include the Jewish people within the Gospel, but would not sacrifice one principle of it for them. As far as he was concerned, the Gospel was the Gospel. We have to bear with him through a long argument before we find the eventual solution!

Paul's personal pain (vv1,2,3)

If we have followed the letter of Romans since the beginning, we can imagine how a Jew might feel who was undecided about whether to accept Jesus as the Messiah; the Christ. What Paul said may have made sense, but it required the setting aside of a sense of national identity through circumcision, and went completely against the Jewish teaching of the day about the laws of Moses and their essential place in God's revelation. It is likely that Paul had seen many people responding to his teaching with such anguish, and had spent many hours talking to them about what it meant to accept Christ as Messiah. Perhaps, when explained the prior importance of faith over the law, he had heard many people say to him 'how can you say that what God promised in the past is not true?' Paul would have replied with all the explanations we now find within these chapters of the letter to the Romans (9-11), but we can easily imagine his own heartache when his explanations did not serve to win over his fellow Jews.

The strength of Paul's feeling is evident in the first verse of our passage. He falls not far short of making a formal vow of speaking the truth, calling on three witnesses; on Christ, his conscience, and the Holy Spirit (9:1). His vow of truth was not made on classic Jewish grounds, but on the Gospel of Christ, the new life in the Spirit, and his own conviction ('my conscience') about the Gospel that had carried him through years of ministry, evangelism and witness. In Paul we find a combination that is rare today, an evangelist who is a consummate theologian, capable of explaining every detail of the faith he preached and able to back up his own words with a detailed knowledge of Scripture and the history of God's people. This may well be part of the reason for Paul's pain, for he saw the tragedy of people not understanding the truth of what was for him, plain and obvious. Perhaps he foresaw that the Christian Church would have to grow away from Judaism, creating the splits, divisions and anti-Semitism that has blighted world history. How painful that would be to see in one's spirit!

Paul asks a rhetorical question in verse 2 by suggesting that he might take some of the consequences of the rejection of the Jewish people on himself. It seems an odd question to us, given that he had just proclaimed 'nothing can separate us from the love of God!' It is possible that this was an expression of the depth of his feeling rather than a genuine prayer, or possibly that Paul was reflecting an incident that happened in the Old Testament times. The people of Israel rebelled after they had left Egypt and God said he would have to cut them off and start again with Moses. Moses himself was so shocked at this he pleaded with the Lord to be faithful to his own promises and save the people (Ex. 24:3-8, 32:32). Paul may have intended us to see the connection with this famous incident because for him, the issue was the same; God's faithfulness to His own promises.

The benefits of the Israelites (vv4,5)

Paul then appears to take up the question he left in chapter 3; 'what advantage, then, has the Jew?' (3:1). Some of the benefits Paul lists (9:4,5) are well known to us, but some are not, and the first one makes for an extraordinary beginning. He says that the people of Israel possess the 'adoption'. In the previous chapter, Paul described those who had faith as possessing the 'spirit of adoption' (8:15), and then finally possessing the complete 'adoption' at the end of time (8:23), which is the final inheritance of the Kingdom of God. Nowhere else in the Bible is this phrase used in relation to the People of Israel, but where it is used of those who believe in Christ, it points forward to the end times when the final inheritance of Christ is received (Gal 4:5, Ep 1:5). What Paul has in mind here is that the People of Israel were the first to receive the promise of God's inheritance through Abraham (Gen 12:2,3, 16:1-6 etc); and now those who have responded by faith to Christ have received these same promises. However, both these promises only reach fulfilment at the end times, and this is Paul's clue to us about the resolution of the problem. It will be found in the future, at the end times! (see 11:17f.)

Paul continues with a number of more obvious 'possessions' of being an Israelite. The 'Shekinah Glory' was God's visible presence through the cloud which led the people of Israel through the desert (Ex 16:10 etc.) and which came to rest in the Temple after its consecration (2 Chron 5:14); but it was something that the prophets said would one day rest amongst God's own people (Isaiah 40:5). So the glory of God was first seen in Israel, but in fulfilment of prophecy was later seen in Jesus (John 1:14) and also within God's people, the Church (Phil 2:11).

Next, by the Covenants, Paul probably meant the covenants with Abraham (Gen 12:2,3, 15:1-5, 17:1f.) and then with Moses (Ex 19:5, 24:7 etc.). The famous third covenant was with David (2 Samuel 23:5 etc.) and became the basis for the hope of the Messiah. Yet again, this possession was something that began with the People of Israel, but was inherited by the Church, after the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah!

The 'giving of the law' (Ex 20 f.) was the fourth possessions of the Israelites. Clearly, Moses was the man who received God's revelation of the law, and he was the most important figure in Israelite history, for through Moses and the law, Israel was made into a viable nation. Paul had already explained in his letter that 'the law' was dead as an authority over people (7:1f.), but not dead of itself, for it had a role to play in revealing sin (7:7f.). It was given first to God's people the Israelites, but it needed to be fulfilled, not thrown away.

Paul called the fifth possession of the Israelites the 'rites of worship'. In this sentence, Paul used the relatively rare word 'leitros' which means the forms of worship which were done in the 'service' of Almighty God. Israel first possessed the 'worship' because they were the first people to worship God as Creator and Lord. Little is said in the New Testament about worship and service except that 'worship' is what we owe God as our creator, and it is not used in connection with any description of what we might call 'acts of worship' today.

The sixth possession was the 'promises'. Paul probably used this word as a 'catch-all' for the many promises of God within the Old Testament Scriptures, both from the more ancient books of the law and also the works of the prophets. They were too numerous to mention individually.

Lastly, and significantly (and also seventhly!), Paul said that the people of Israel possessed 'the patriarchs'; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons from whom derived the twelve tribes of Israel. More importantly, however, they were the progenitors of the Israelite people and therefore also the Messiah. The people of Israel in Jesus' day were expecting a Messiah, but they had not responded to Jesus, God's true Messiah, and this lay at the root of the problem Paul now faced. Those who accepted Jesus as Messiah had no difficulty connecting the history of the people of Israel with the church of the future consisting of everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike, who accepted Jesus as Messiah, the Christ.

It is essential for us to see within this list that Paul mentions seven essential features of Israelite identity and life that were deeply rooted in the Old Testament and the traditions of all Jewish people. However, none of them were 'dumped' by his teaching or by Jesus or by the Church. According to Paul, all of them were essential both to the Jewish identity and also to the new life of God's new People, the Church. Paul was not going to give up his Jewish identity or his total commitment to Jesus and the Gospel. For him the two were completely compatible, and his only problem was to try to explain how God would fulfil His promises to those Jewish people who would not accept Jesus as Messiah. It was his hope that most Jewish people would accept the Messiah, and he did not know that two thousand years later, they would be a separate nation of people.

Application

There is not much we can take from this passage, except the observation that although Paul was concerned to deal with the problem of Jews who did not accept Jesus as Christ, he appears to be far more strongly committed to the unity of what we call the Old Covenant and the New. On the one hand, Paul took nothing back from his preaching of the Gospel, and on the other hand, he sought to uphold the faithfulness of God through the generations and would not dismiss anything of the history of God's dealing with His people, the Israelites.

Paul's insistence is essential, and it answers the question with which we began this study. God is indeed faithful throughout the generations. Paul appears to be hinting at this all the way through what he says in today's passage, and it will be his conclusion at the end of the long theological discussion of this which ends in chapter 11. Too many Christians will tell you that they do not hear much from the Old Testament today; and I have met too many preachers who purposefully avoid the Old Testament because they were not taught much of substance about it in their training. Certainly not the kind of study that would enable people to make the spiritual connections that are essential to our understanding of the everlasting faithfulness of God. It is vital for the future of God's people that we connect Old and New Testaments of our Bible, and in our own day, read and know about the history of our churches as well. Unless we can say that God has been faithful to His people throughout history, then our appeal to people today is but one of any number of religions that people like to invent. The God we explain to other people in our evangelism is either our Creator; faithful, consistent and true throughout history, or we have not understood Him properly!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Have you come across much connection between Jewish people and the Church? How could better dialogue be obtained between Christians and Jews?
2. Have you come across Jewish Christians? Potentially, do you think they have anything they can teach the rest of the church?
3. Do you think the seven things listed by Paul in this text are important to Christians? If not, why not?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The discipleship issue that arises from this text is the challenge to understand the Old Testament and the history of the church. Over the years, I have found that people can be very reluctant to explore the Old Testament and even use it for the purposes of preaching. Indeed, when I present Old Testament material on this website I find that the numbers using it go down, and when I present New Testament material it goes up! This tells me that there is still a problem. I hope that people will gradually see the whole of the Bible as God's Word!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *The challenge of this passage is to understand what the Old Testament says about God through the history of the Israelite people. Look up some of the passages referred to earlier and explore what they can add to your knowledge of God.*
- *Pray for the people of Israel and for those who are still seeking a Messiah. Pray that their reading of the Bible (the Old testament, will help them come closer to an understanding of the work of Jesus as the Messiah.*

Final Prayer

Great God of love, come to the hearts of the poor and downtrodden, and all those who need the hope that You alone can give; and may we, knowing the privileges of the life we have been given, do all in our power to serve You, the One who serves all people, both rich and poor. Thank You, God of love: AMEN
