

Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome breaks down into three main sections: chapters 1-8, chapters 9-11, and chapters 10-16. Those first eight chapters, from which our readings came during most of the month of July, have sometimes been called Paul's theological "last will and testament." They explore a question at the heart of Paul's theology: God's righteousness and what that means for our lives. While I have been away from here on Sunday mornings, I have been following along from the pews during this past month. That first section culminates with the extraordinary words we heard two weeks ago at the end of chapter eight:

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose...what then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced 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.*

Paul has some of the most amazing insights into the life of faith that you will find in all of Scripture, but it seems to me that these verses are one of those moments when he really does let God's light shine through his words in all of its glory. If I Corinthians 13 is often a "favorite choice" for weddings ("love is patient and kind...") then in a similar way these verses from Romans 8 are often a favorite choice for funerals, and with good reason. Death forces upon us the most profound theological questions; in a sense the only ones that ultimately matter. Death does not allow us to be trite or superficial in our thinking; it's where the rubber meets the road and ultimately why faith matters. These words take us to the very heart of Paul's understanding of the meaning of the resurrection, and in this crescendo Paul is insisting that God's love is for real, and nothing can separate us from that love. *Nothing*.

So then we get to Chapters 9-11, representing the *second* major section of Romans. Last weekend's reading came from the opening verses of chapter nine; this weekend we read from chapter ten, and then next weekend we'll be reading from chapter eleven. So we get three weeks to explore this second section of the letter. It's best if you try to hold these three chapters together as one "unit" rather than dividing them up into little pieces. In the past, some scholars saw these three chapters as one Paul's famous digressions. But most now see them not as a digression, but as an extension of what that first section means in practical terms.

Paul's theology is never abstract. He now explores *the* hot-button issue of his day to ask a contextual question that he had hinted at earlier, and now wishes to explore in more depth. It's a question that had huge implications both for the developing Church and for Paul personally: *what is the relationship between Jews and Christians, between synagogue and church, after Jesus?* Or to put it negatively: has God rejected God's people? Has the Church superseded Israel as God's chosen, beloved people? If you use the metaphor to speak of the Church as the "new Israel"—then what about the old Israel, the original Israel? Where do they now fit into God's plan?

As I said to you when we began reading from this letter at the end of June, the Church in Rome consisted of both Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians. But the growth was coming from the Gentile side of things, not Jews. And as that happened...as those *newcomers* came in because of the success of people like Paul as missionaries, the Church was increasingly getting disconnected from its Jewish roots. The writing was on the wall, even if the name "Christian" didn't yet exist.

But among those Jewish followers of Jesus, we might imagine Jewish families divided—a brother or sister who understands Jesus to be the long-awaited messiah pray for Messiah to come again, while another family member prays for Messiah to come for the first time. Imagine the theological arguments at *those* family gatherings! Keep in mind that Paul explores this question *as a Jew*. As we'll hear him saying next weekend—"I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin." Paul doesn't think of himself as a Christian in the same way we do; he hasn't "converted" in the way that we use that word. He is a Jew who has become a disciple of Rabbi Jesus, *Yeshua Messiah*—in whom he believes the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been broken down. He is a Jew who believes that in Yeshua Messiah he has seen the fulfillment of God's purposes and the love of God made flesh, a love from which nothing in all creation can separate us. But he has other Jewish friends who don't see it this way. So it's not an abstract question for him. It goes to the heart of his self-identity and the identity of those early communities of people who sought God by Way of Jesus.

You can tell in this entire section that Paul wrestles with all of this with no small amount of pathos. He goes back and forth, anticipating counter-arguments and responses, which is part of what makes this section so difficult to understand. When is he saying what he believes and when is he offering a counter-argument? It isn't always clear! In fact, this section is almost certainly the most difficult of the three to understand, and the verses we heard today are probably the most difficult verses of all within that second section. Even so, in the end, Paul's final response seems very clear. God has certainly not rejected God's people! By no means!

How can Paul say this? *Because God's righteousness and God's promises are binding*. In the very same way that Paul is so clear that nothing in all of creation can separate us from God's love, he is equally clear that God is not fickle. Even when God's people (both Jews and Christians) are unfaithful, forgetful, uncertain, and disobedient: God is still God. God is still faithful to God's promises made through the covenant to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob *forever*. If that is what God said, says Paul, then that is what God means.

*Jews are still God's chosen people*. But Paul knows "chosen-ness" (for both Jews and Christians) isn't about special treatment or favoritism. It's about being faithful to God's mission. Paul knows that God's promises were entrusted to Israel for the sake of the world, so that Israel might live into its highest calling: to be a "light to the nations"—the *goyim*. He now believes that this has been entrusted to the Church—a community that is living out, in practice, the reality that in Christ "there is no longer any distinction between Jew or Gentile."

It's within the context of this larger discussion that Paul explores the role of the Torah. In today's reading, Paul seems to be contrasting two different understandings of the Torah which are in tension with each other within the Old Testament itself. On the one hand, "Moses writes of the righteousness that comes from the law: that the person who obeys these things will live by them." On the other hand, the second quote also comes from the Old Testament, and that is about the righteousness of faith: "the word is very near you, on your lips, and in your heart." These seem contradictory, but then again, the Old Testament is comfortable with contradiction: sometimes it reveals a deeper truth. Paul then asks a whole bunch of very good questions at the end of the reading we heard today about those who have not heard the gospel proclaimed:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

He seems to be concluding that we can leave some questions in God's hands, in this case about how Jews and Christians can both be saved. God gets to be the decider on those anyway. But in the present (by which I mean *Paul's* present tense) the Church can learn both positive and negative lessons from those who sought to follow the old covenant as we strive to be faithful to the new one. That begins with proclaiming the good news, sometimes even with words.

Now to *our* present-tense: you and I come to these chapters in a very different set of circumstances. After nearly two thousand years of Christianity as a separate religion from Judaism, and including some rather harsh decades and even centuries of Christian anti-Semitism and the holocaust, we find ourselves in a very different time and place. So how do we approach these questions today about how Christians and Jews ought to relate to one another? We do so as people who have neighbors and friends and even family members who worship in synagogues. Are they "incomplete" or "unsaved" because they are waiting for Messiah to come, rather than for Messiah to come again? Over the past few years we've had an interfaith Bible study meeting at St. Clare House, Christians and Jews together, reading Old Testament texts. Is the goal of that study for us as Christians to "complete" Jews, by telling them that they need to accept Jesus as Messiah to be saved? Well, in my best St. Paul imitation let me say, "*certainly not!*" But does that mean that we have to hide our own light, our own faith and love for Jesus under a bushel basket? *By no means!*

When we meet, there is the possibility for mutual benefit and growth. We worship the same God, even if we travel paths to get there. We do sometimes bump up against our differences. We are not the same. I like the way that the late, great, Krister Stendahl put it; Bishop Stendahl was a Pauline scholar who taught New Testament at Harvard and also served as bishop of Sweden. He talked about "cultivating holy envy" in interfaith dialogues: about not trying to find the ways that our own path is superior to the other, but rather about honoring and even trying to emulate what we see as holy in "the other." I think it's a copout to just say "well, we are all the same" and to smooth over our differences. In fact what makes interfaith dialogue so interesting is when we bump up against those differences and have a chance to learn something new. To do that, though, we need to learn how to encounter the other without fear and with something more even than respect or curiosity: with a kind of "holy envy" that Bishop Stendahl spoke of.

In Romans 9-11, St. Paul doesn't answer every question for us that will ever arise about the relationship between Christians and Jews. Stendahl's reading of those chapters, by the way, is to say that Christians are essentially "honorary Jews." What Paul does do for us is to model a process, a way of being authentic and honest in our faith. Like Jacob he wrestles with God and with big theological questions. But what he never loses sight of is this: first of all, the God we know through Jesus Christ is a God of love. And secondly, it is not our work to decide who is saved and isn't.

Our work to share the good news, and to *live it* (with God's help) and to keep ourselves open to the surprising grace of God, wherever it may appear.