

The Year of St. Paul



The Letter to the Ro-

St. Paul is always mindful of his own people, the “Chosen People of God.” This is now evident as his thought, for all people being called by God in this letter to the Romans, is interrupted to address the mystery of Israel’s Destiny in chapters nine through eleven, which we deal with today.

Chapter eight had filled all the readers of this letter with enormous hope because of the new life of baptism and the newly identified gifts of the Holy Spirit. “God is for us” is a powerful statement that true believers can hang their hats on.

Paul’s Ever-Present Concern For Israel

But as we now see, Paul returns to his great concern for his brothers and sisters of Israel’s lineage. And it is important for us to read and understand this clearly. From his first letter, to the Thessalonians, and what we know from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul never waived in his belief and teaching that the Jewish people remained the chosen after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus came first to save the “Children of Abraham” and then all others. Those of Jewish tradition would find this difficult.

St. Paul’s immediate concern is the lack of a faith that should lead them to Jesus as the fulfillment of everything they profess. He has already shown that it is God’s will for all people to be saved. Unfortunately too many are content on simply relying on their tradition and lineage. “We are the chosen

people of God.” And now the Jewish people are becoming agitated by Paul’s words —that not all would be saved — not because of God, but because of their own choosing — in lineage and History — rather than life being lived. St. Paul challenges them to go beyond the lineage and see

the faith that was to be lived, secured in the promises of God. God’s promises of old have been fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ.

Our Own History

We don’t need to think back too far in our Catholic tradition to remember a similar mentality. In our own pre-Vatican Council II

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mentality, most of us were led to believe, whether validly or invalidly, that salvation came only through the Catholic Church. No one else could be saved. How harsh that was for our protestant friends, others who believed and professed in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, to hear. Even more so for those who believed in God but had not heard the message of salvation in the gospel of Jesus Christ. How often did we pray for them?

As Catholics, we were too often “law-bound,” that is, if we followed what the Church said to do, we believed that we’d go to heaven. In many cases, faith played little part in religious life. We went to church on Sundays, didn’t eat meat on Fridays, went to confession once a month, and supported the Church. *These were not readily taken in as avenues for us to become joined in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These were things passed on from one generation to another. If I do these faithfully, albeit grumbling, I’ll be saved. In some ways, it’s still here.*

If Paul were with us today, these are the very things he would be addressing, so similar to those held by the “faithful” Jew of the time, in Rome and elsewhere.

So when St. Paul addresses a similar issue with his Jewish counterparts, the words should also speak to us. We must remember that there is always greater meaning than what is found in seeing ink on paper. ***Printed words are to become spoken words. And spoken words are to be seen in the work of God acting today through believers.***

All Things Are Of And From God Alone

At the same time, Paul is reprimanding those

Overview of Romans Chapters 9-11

The gospel and God’s plan (9:1-11:36)

Paul’s lament and Israel’s privileges (9:1-5)

The surprising way of God (9:6-13)

God’s sovereign freedom and justice (9:14-24)

The present state of God’s people and Scripture (9:25-29)

Israel’s mistake (9:30-10:4)

Biblical confirmation (10:5-13)

Accepting and rejecting the gospel (10:14-21)

A remnant within Israel (11:1-10)

Jews and Gentiles (11:11-16)

The olive tree (11:17-24)

The mystery of salvation (11:25-32)

Celebratory conclusion (11:33-36)

who believe in the old covenantal understanding, “If I do this, then God must do this.” They fail to see that God has done far more than the covenant required. And what they think is required in return is not what is expected. They continue to try to defend themselves through past deals made on their own behalf. God’s plan of salvation is ignored, even though they have heard the prophets and know the history of God surprisingly renewing them time and again.

Their false self-righteousness is vigorously attacked by Paul. Only through God can we become righteous, for this means acknowledging that only God is righteous, and that we only share in that gift. He shows the righteousness of which Moses wrote concerning the fulfillment of the law as inadequate since the righteousness of God must be professed, and found in the heart. And when it is found in the heart, it is lived, in oneness with the righteousness of God and the power of God who can do all things. Paul says, “*For Christ is the end of the law for the justification of everyone who has faith.*” (10:4)

[Remember, Paul knew scripture very well. He was taught by Gamaliel, a learned scholar of the law in Paul’s time. He was a Pharisee and staunch observer of the law. He learned to dig down to the essence of the teaching and law, not simply memorize it. This enabled Paul to bring to light the inadequacies of faith that is shown by too many of the “children of Israel.”]

There is a remnant. Those who come to believe in Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all of God’s promises — as the Messiah, as the Savior, as the one who has again freed Israel from slavery — will be saved. Notice, it will require a new understanding of Messiah and Savior, and what it means to be set free. Freedom, heard of in previous chapters, is not to be seen as a release from foreign control or domination. Freedom means, gives life for the believer.

God’s Plan Of Salvation Will Be Fulfilled — First in a Remnant of Israel

This remnant has come to faith. It is of their own choosing. Paul is basically saying to the non-believers, “Don’t blame God for your inadequacies in faith. You’ve been given the grace to change your heart and mind.” The “elect” are those who freely choose to live lives worthy of justification, of living in the righteousness of God — those who have heard and responded to the good news of Jesus Christ.

These believers will become the hope for the non-believers. They will speak the words of God’s love and salvation, of his works and plans being shown fulfilled. The remnant, entering into the will of God, will do the works of God so in time, the irrevocable call of God to Israel as his “Chosen people” will come to fulfillment.

God’s Plan Of Salvation Will Be Fulfilled — Second in the Gentiles

The Gentiles, through the faith of the “Children of God,” the chosen Israel, will come to know of Jesus Christ and his saving works that bring justification for all people. It will be the faithful Jews who understand the fullness of God’s promise who will make it known now to the Gentiles.

The Gentiles, while not members of the original tree are offered life through their own hearing and responding to the word in faith. Their believing will be like a grafting of a branch onto the tree that is God. They are warned, however, this cannot be taken lightly, for just as those of the chosen people of God will be cut from the tree and its life, so too will the Gentile who professes in words but fails to have it written on the heart. These will be cut from the tree, and from salvation.

The Triumph Of God’s Mercy

God’s mercy is everlasting. It is always offered to all people. And his work is meant to bring all people to salvation. And Paul, constantly overwhelmed by God’s generosity, proclaims:

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!”
(11:34)

His final statements from Isaiah and Job here bring question to those of Jewish tradition, and challenge the Gentile to find appropriate answers.

POINTS TO PONDER

- 1) *The final quotes in chapter 11 leave us with the same basic question as would have been uttered in Paul’s time: “How can God, so far beyond us, come to love us into himself?” Have I ever really considered my worthiness in light of the all-powerful, merciful God who desires me with him?*
- 2) *Through chapter 10 Paul spoke of the word that was to be heard, and then spoken so others may be brought to justification, righteousness, and salvation. What does this say of my living the word through proclamation and evangelization? Do I truly celebrate the new life sought by those now in RCIA? How do I welcome the stranger?*
- 3) *How often do I simply “fulfill the law” and think I’m “doing okay”? Who justifies my words & actions?*
- 4) *Paul says righteousness is God’s alone. Does my self-righteousness, building up of self, block God’s honest righteousness that requires humility?*