

October 16, 2011
ROMANS 1:16-17; 9:1-13

^{1:16} For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

^{9:1} I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. ⁹ For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ 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 him who calls—¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (ESV)

This Sunday we really pick up where we left off in the spring, as we look today at Romans chapter 9. Here is a chapter that gets either forgotten or avoided – forgotten because it comes after the great mountain peak of Romans 8 – the chapter we reviewed last week that tells us that because of Christ and his sacrifice, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ, a chapter that is a summit of praise, promise and grace. But chapter 9 is also avoided because it's filled with hard questions and even harder doctrine.

In fact, the temptation to both forget and avoid Romans 9 has been so great that many of the most famous preachers have never preached on Romans 9-11. But one indicator that we would really miss something essential is how chapter 11 ends:

Paul finishes out the section by saying, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways...!
For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

It's doxology. It's glory. These chapters – chapters 9-11 – display an overflow of God's grace, and are filled with instruction on how to respond to God's grace. So we absolutely MUST look at these three chapters ourselves.

- The Gospel Priority
- The Gospel Promise

- The Tragedy of Religious Unbelief

So first, the priority.

In Romans 1, Paul said that this gospel, this power of God for salvation, "is to *everyone* who believes, but to the Jew *first* and also to the Gentile..." And it's that priority that raises questions here: There is no denying the historical priority. This news of the Messiah had been preached since Genesis 3. That one would come and crush the head of the serpent. That Messiah would come to save God's people – the people that God had made covenant with, the people he had given the law to, the people that he had remained faithful to – the Jews. Jesus is Jewish. The disciples were Jewish. Paul is Jewish – he was trained as a rabbi. This is a *Jewish* religion, and so this gospel is clearly, at minimum, for the Jews. *At least* for the Jews.

- Since the Christ is "descended from David according to the flesh" (1:3)
- Since, Paul will tell us in chapter 3, "there is great value in circumcision,"
- Since that saving promise was made "to Abraham and his descendants" (4:13), and
- Since, right here in 9:5, he even says "To the Jews belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all...."

Paul says that deity, Messiah, *God himself*, has come in the flesh from the seed, from the race of the Jews, **so this is their good news and this is their Messiah.**

So ... *what's up?* Most Jews were *not* picking up on this gospel – the *vast majority* were not followers of Jesus. Paul has been setting out proof that the grace of God in Christ guarantees that God will save everyone he has foreknown and predestined... and yet the unbelief of most of Paul's fellow-Jews challenges this claim. So prove it Paul. Prove that God will be faithful to the Gentiles if he hasn't been faithful first to the Jews.

Just two things I want you to think about here. First, the *relevance* of the priority of the Jews, and secondly how Paul's first love is God's as well.

The story of Israel is a sad and sobering one. Here is a nation that counted itself as having an inside track with God. They clearly saw themselves as *the* people of God, the *chosen* nation, the nation close to God's heart, with advantages that no other nation had. With really good reason, they regarded themselves as having a special, privileged position with God.

Now this is relevant because *just think* of all of the similarities between the Jew of Romans, and the religious *unbeliever* in the Christian church today. In some ways these similarities between the Jew of Romans, and the religious *unbeliever* in the church are *stronger* than those between the Jew of Romans and a secular and liberal Jewish person today.

Look, **first**, the "Jew" is pleased to think that he or she has a relationship with God. Nominal Christians fit exactly that description. **Second**, the "Jew" knows God's moral standards because they have been entrusted with the very words of God (3:2). In our language, they have a Bible. It's the same with us – how many bibles are in your household? I bet more than one. **Third**, the 'Jew' approves of God's moral standards (2:18b) and is happy to tell others what is right and what

is wrong – they're not at all like the wicked people of chapter 1 who approve of wrongdoing. **Fourth**, the 'Jew' has a religious history and has enjoyed tremendous religious privileges... There really are few differences between all of this and the person who has a Christian parent, has belonged to a church for a time, has been baptized... maybe they go to a well-known church or have rubbed shoulders with well-known Christians. They 'wear the T-shirt'. They identify as a "good" Christian... but they are a stranger to grace. They are close relatives of the elder brother of Luke 15. They are good, deserving, and they've earned a place in the church. But they forget that all of these privileges were *given*, and instead think of them *as* a given, because of who *they* are.

This is absolutely relevant for us. We think our thoughts, our opinions, our standing, even our standing before God, is because of who we are – WE are God's priority – not because of what we have been graciously given by God.

But second, if this is where you are... you come to church, but you're wary of Christians... or you think you're a good person, and you like the encouraging messages about Jesus, but the stuff about sin... that's for the other guy... listen to Paul's love for you. Because it is the same as God's love for you:

My wife and I are about to commence watching – we do these things long after everyone else has done them – but we're about to commence watching the entire, final, 8th season of *24*.

24 is an action adventure show that is extreme. Watching *24* episodes back-to-back of this show is like getting shot up with a combined cocktail of steroids, B-12, Caffeine, Ginkgo-balboa, and testosterone.

If you're not familiar with it, it's about a former Special Forces agent, Jack Bauer, who now serves as a counter-terrorist operative, and every season is *24* 1-hour episodes that are supposed to be happening in real time. And a lot happens in one day! In fact, the show wants you to know that Jack Bauer has saved the life of every last American – you, me, everyone – Jack Bauer saves *all* our lives. Without him, this building would be empty today.

But Jack Bauer has nothing on the Apostle Paul. Think about it: If you said to some contestants on *Jeopardy*, "This TV character was whipped 5 times, three times he was beaten with rods, once he was stoned, three times he was shipwrecked, a night and day he was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys he was in danger from rivers, in danger from robbers, in danger from his own people, in danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure,"¹ I have no doubt that one or two of the contestants would ring the buzzer and say, "Jack Bauer."

But these are things that happened throughout Paul's ministry. There are differences, of course, but Paul is also Jack Bauer-like in that he is willing to do almost *anything* to save the people he cares about. Paul says in 1st Timothy, "I am willing to suffer all things for the sake of the elect." Another similarity is that both are willing to be the only person in the room who knows and

¹ 2 Corinthians 11:24–29, ESV.

believes the truth, and is willing to suffer all of the consequences for hanging on to the truth when everyone else is either telling, or trusting in, lies.

Paul says in verses 1 and 2: "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 brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. That sacrifice – the real difference between Paul and Jack Bauer is – Jack Bauer kills his enemy – and Paul loves them.

You see, as Paul preached and taught that all of the riches of salvation are in Christ Jesus, and centered and focused his ministry on the Person of Messiah, the Person of Christ, he became, in the eyes of the Jews of his day, their enemy.

Had a Jew read the letter to the Romans – we'll get into this more in our second point – he would have regarded it as a gigantic put-down to the whole nation. Paul's ministry everywhere stirred up antagonism with his fellow Jews. He made them angry and upset, even violent in their rage against him.

And yet, he is not their enemy. He is their loving, hurting friend. It breaks his heart that he has to tell them these things. The hurt is real.

A man said to a friend, "I hear you dismissed your pastor. What went wrong?" The friend said, "Well, he kept telling us we were going to hell." The man said, "What does the new pastor say?" The friend said, "The new pastor keeps saying we're going to hell, too." "So what's the difference?" "Well," the friend said, "the difference is that when the first one said it, he sounded like he was glad about it, but when the new man says it, he sounds like it's breaking his heart." That is what Paul is saying here. It is breaking his heart that he has to tell us these things.

Why? Because he's telling them that the promises of God were always for *unbelieving* Israel. They were never God's priority because they as a people were so good, but God's priority was for his own heart of grace for those who did *not* believe. Israel was the first to know about, and to hear the promises of this good and gracious God, but the message was always for *sinner*s. And it breaks Paul's heart to see that they are so far from knowing his grace.

In fact, Paul says, I would trade places in hell with you. He would be anathema, put under the curse. He would give up HIS salvation for theirs. Now he *can't* do that. Moses tried this – after the golden calf he said to God, "Blot ME out of your book." But that can't happen. God doesn't grant wishes like that. You can't put someone in hell that has the love of Christ, who would give up their life for another – for a *sinner*. And remember the end of chapter 8; it's impossible for a believer to be separated from the love of God in Christ.

But his point is this: Paul's desire to be accursed and cut off from God to see his brothers and sisters saved proves that you're not a Christian by being nice, or because you've been in this church for 50 years, or because you grew up in a "Christian home," any more than being Jewish makes you righteous. A sacrifice IS needed... but the only way to have that is to believe in the

promise. That is Paul's priority, that you believe in the gospel of Grace, rather than thinking that you are the priority by birth or by works.

- The Promise

Now this takes us – this overlaps with – our second point about the promise. Paul outlines, starting at verse 4, the promises of God. Why? Because what he has just said about the priority – that yes, historically speaking, this gospel was offered first to the Jews, but that the real priority of this message is about God and His grace to all humanity – was incredibly confusing.

So Paul painstakingly reviews them.² In fact, of all the Old Testament quotes in all Paul's letters, one third are squeezed into these three chapters, 9-11, all so that he can prove one thing about the gospel.

What is it? That this gospel is about the righteousness of God – how to be right with God – that gracious gift of God that allows us to stand before him.

It is, friends, the most important question of your life. I know that you might be thinking that the most important thing in your life right now is whether you can pay that bill, or a test result from the doctor, or whether your thesis will be accepted, or whether you'll get that job. But it's not. This is it. Can I stand before God? Are we right with God?

Now those verse in chapter 1 told us that that righteousness was by faith, and was necessary because of the wrath of God against the wicked – meaning all of us. His wrath against sinners. I know that this message is unpopular, but God's wrath against sinners is righteous, good, and beautiful. Really, it is. There is no concept, no idea of justice without it. All have sinned without exception. We *deserve* his wrath. I know I do. And Paul says that if you don't really hear that his righteous wrath is directed at you, the message of His saving righteousness won't be precious to us.

And then Paul moved on in chapter 3 to explain that the way this righteousness is given to us, credited to us, imputed or reckoned to us, is by faith in Jesus Christ who has been given to us as an atoning sacrifice, as a penal substitution. And when we trust in him, we receive that beautiful and perfect righteousness. Some of us have heard this over and over and we haven't really heart-grasped this. It's here (head). But it never went where it needs to go – from His heart into yours. That's Romans 3-4.

In Romans 5-8 were all about... what? One thing. It's the reason this church has the name it has. For those that know that they are sinners, saved by grace, there is an unshakeable *hope*. We know that nothing can separate us from the love and the gift of righteousness from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. That is largely what Romans 5-8 are about: hope in Christ.

² Chapters 9-11 contain a unique concentration of Old Testament quotations. On average every third verse is a quote from the OT. Of all the Old Testament quotes in all Paul's letters, one third are squeezed into these three chapters. This makes it harder for us to take the easy path of skipping over the quotes, and daunting to think we need to look at each quote in its Old Testament context. Ash, Christopher. (2009). *Teaching Romans, Volume 2: Unlocking Romans 9–16 for the Bible Teacher* (D. Jackman & R. Sydserff, Ed.) (50). Ross-shire, Scotland; London: Proclamation Trust Media; Christian Focus Publications.

But there is an undercurrent in Romans 5-8. Who is it that is receiving this great blessing of justification – the righteousness of God? Namely, who is it that is trusting in Christ by faith? The answer? Gentiles. Gentiles are receiving this hope of future glory. Who is receiving this hope of future glory, and who appears to be God's elect? These Johnny-come-latelys, the Gentiles.

So what IS the place of the Jews in God's plan? What is the place of the chosen people? Even if the priority of the gospel is God and His grace, the promise DID come *first* to the Jews and *then* to the Gentiles.

You can see why this is so important. For the Jew, he's saying, "Paul, if we listened to you, you'd have us believe that we are not God's people." And the Gentiles are saying, "Paul, we love these promises of God's salvation for those who believe – gentiles included – but we're learning enough about the bible to know that God made these promises to Israel, and we look around, and they don't believe. So if those promises aren't kept, will the promises of us be kept?"

This is why John Piper wrote a book on Romans 9-11 called "The Justification of God." Is God really faithful to his promises? God has promised to save his people, but that promise has largely been unfulfilled. How does God justify this? There is no real basis for the hope of chapters 5-8 if God cannot do this.

Paul starts his answer by outlining the many privileges that he set before them: His headline privilege is they are "Israelites." It simply means that they were members of the outward people who belonged to God, and it's something to be deeply glad about because it gave them access to all of these sub-privileges.

And under this headline he lists seven other privileges and then a final—rather different—one.

- First, "theirs is the adoption," meaning that Israel as a people has a relationship with God as "the son of God."
- Second, the "glory" means they experienced the presence of God in the fiery cloud, and later in the Tabernacle and the Temple.
- "The covenants" mean all the different times and ways in which God said to them, "You will be my people, and I will be your God" – the covenants made with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and later to David.
- "The giving of the law" at Mt. Sinai gave them access to the very words of God.
- "The worship" probably refers to the whole Temple system of sacrifices by which a sinful people could still dwell in the presence of a holy God.
- "The promises," and "the patriarchs' who receive those promises, are Paul's way of reminding them that every generation heard about God's commitment to them.
- Finally, a privilege is of a different kind. All of the privileges listed so far belong to them ("Theirs is ... Theirs are ..."). But this last one comes "*from* them" but he does not belong to them.

He is "Christ, who is God" —not only over the Israelites, not only the "Son of God in power," but "God over all." Paul's point is, this IS a privilege – you were told that Messiah would come from the Jews, but Jesus can never be like a trophy kept in a glass cabinet as if to say, "He belongs to *us*," because he is God over *all* and all need to bow the knee to *him*.

Now, friends, put yourself in the shoes of the Roman Jew who is listening to this. Because remember what we said: the similarities between the Jew of Romans, and the religious *unbeliever* in the church today are *stronger* than those between the Jew of Romans and a secular and liberal Jewish person today.

And YOU have all of these same privileges.

Look if you grew up in a Christian home, if there were – there are – bibles around you that you never get the time to read, if you were raised to memorize some scripture, if you were baptized, if your parents or brothers or sisters, or the people in your church confirmed to you how great and good God is, and if you learned in Sunday school that all of these privileges of Israel are fulfilled in the Christ...

- that he is the focus of Israel's adoption (He fulfills Israel's calling as "son of God.")
- that he is the presence on earth of the divine glory;
- that he is the climax of the covenants who brings in the New Covenant;
- that he is the goal and purpose of the law;
- that he is the fulfillment of the sacrifices;
- that he is the confirmation of the promises to the patriarchs.

...and if you've know all of this, and yet it hasn't broken into your heart, then Paul has – I have – great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. Because you have received a gift without any regard for the giver.

The gospel message, brothers and sisters, must be activated. It would be as if one had thrown a rope to a drowning man. The throwing of that rope could not save the man unless someone were at the other end drawing him into shore.

This is what God has done. By his electing love, and through these privileges, God draws to himself those who hear His message. The man may have the rope, but he still needs the efficient force of God drawing him in. Who, then, deserves the praise for salvation, the man who grabs the rope? No—the God who draws him in!

Don't just grab onto these privileges, but grab onto the promise – the promised one – Jesus Christ. And this takes us to our last, and very brief point:

- **Now finally, the tragedy of religious unbelief.**

V.6 is the summary statement of chapter 9. It's Paul's conclusion, and then he will explain how he gets there. We will NOT be able to ties this up this week. But it's a powerful point:

"But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel..."

What's he saying? Does God fulfill all his promises? To the Jews – yes. Yes, he does. But not every ethnically Jewish Israelite is a true Israelite. Just because you are physically, genetically, a child of Abraham, does not mean that you are a recipient of God's promise. And in case we didn't get it, Paul puts it another way: "...and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."

Remember, Abraham had two children. He had Isaac through Sarah, and Ishmael through Hagar. And both Abraham and Sarah believed that the promise would come through Ishmael. And even after God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have Isaac after Ishmael was born, basically, Abraham said, "No need. We have Ishmael. We're cool."

But God said, "No." Ishmael was a son of Abraham, but he was NOT a son of the promise.

See, it's not the children of the flesh who are the children of God but the children of the promise that are truly counted as the offspring of God. It is not going to be through the child of the flesh, but through the miracle child. It is not, Paul says, going to be accomplished through human means – your works – but by miraculous means. By God. He is the one mighty to save.

Now the Jews would have agreed with all of this – "Paul, we agree! Ishmael is not a son of the promise – he came from Hagar, after all. It's Isaac." And Paul says, "Okay, let me explain this again, because I'm trying to explain an eternal principle. It's the way God has always worked. It's the way of grace. So (v. 10), look at Rebekah. She's an even better example. She conceived 2 children by one man. No longer two different women, but 1 mother. And one father. Even better, twins in the womb.

And what was the promise to Rebekah? "The older will serve the younger." Esau will serve Jacob. Blessing will not follow human, fleshly birthright. It won't come through your way, it will come God's way.

Friends, we're going to get into the whole Jacob I loved Esau I hated thing next week. Come back. It's interesting stuff. But hear this: You want God to work your way – you believe it, you hold onto it, and you can't see it any other way. But he doesn't. He works only in line with his promises.

You know, if I looked at my brother, my sister and myself, I would have said that my sister would have made the best Christian. She's nicer. She is more naturally Christ-like. But so far it hasn't happened. God has chosen the hellions – my brother and I. If I were to choose an apostle to the Jews, I would have chosen Paul, a rabbi – a well placed rabbi – and I would have chosen Simon Peter, the fisherman with the Greek name, to go to the Gentiles. But God reverses it. I would have chosen the man's man, Esau. Jacob is a cheat, a louse, a trickster.

But no, before they were born, before they did anything – not on the basis of looking ahead at what they would do – but because of HIS purposes. God chose because of his love. Because of grace.

There was a boy who did not have much athletic ability. Every time he and his friends would play some game he was always the last to be chosen. One day two new guys came to play with them. They were a little older, so they were the team captains and allowed to choose. The first team captain chose the boy who had always been chosen last before. Why? They found out later that it was because they were brothers, and he loved his brother. That is how it is with God. He chose us not because of our abilities or works or how we think he should do things, but because he loves us.

Now we are ending here. It's almost not fair. Because a lot of us don't like this. It makes God seem so controlling. But Paul says that you want to keep God's love small, in a religious box, restricted to a set of rules, and Paul says no. If that is where you could keep him, you would be stuck in your unbelief, thinking that your ways are better than his.

But the love of God is generous. It is lavish. His grace and love bursts the banks and overflows. He is more just, more generous, more angry at sin, more loving to sinners than you can imagine.

Let's pray.