

A Sermon by
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Chinese Christian Church
of New Jersey

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Gospel Truth and Israel's History

ROMANS 9:1-33

All men need the gospel, because all men are living under the principle of God's wrath. God's wrath is not just judgment that comes in the form of wars and natural disasters; God's wrath is also something that happens inside of a person. When a certain person suppresses truth, that person's heart becomes a little harder than it was before the truth was suppressed. Another way to describe this hardness of [the] heart is to say that when a certain person suppresses truth, that person loses some of his God-given capacity to recognize truth and respond to truth. In the Exodus story, we must understand that Pharaoh's heart did not harden overnight. It was a step-by-step process that probably began when he was a young child.

Now, the scary thing about God's wrath is that it is always poured out whenever truth is suppressed. There are no exceptions to this rule. A person who knows a lot of truth can actually experience more wrath than the person who knows very little truth simply because he has more truth to suppress. The Jewish leaders who lived during the time of Christ made the mistake of thinking that they had a big advantage over the Gentiles when it came to entering the kingdom of God and going to heaven. But, they failed to realize that it is not the amount of truth a certain person possesses that determines whether or not that person gets to heaven; rather, it is what that person does with the truth he has.

Being entrusted with the very words of God is a tremendous privilege, but it does not guarantee righteousness and haven. A person must commit himself to the truth he knows. And, this commitment on the part of man is what the Bible calls faith. Faith is man's part of the equation that must come together to produce righteousness. Grace is God's part of the equation. EPHESIANS 2:8 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith..." This is the gospel truth.

These principles that determine whether or not a person can experience righteousness and go to heaven—this gospel truth—did not begin with the New Testament. These principles have existed throughout history. Even before the Old Testament was written, every person who experienced righteousness had to exercise faith in the truth that had been revealed to him, and that included the man named Abraham that we read about in the Book of GENESIS. An example of how Abraham exercised faith even before the Ten Commandments were recorded is when God promised him that he would have a son. Even though he and his wife were too old to have children, he believed God's promise was true.

Maybe some of you are now aware that I have been trying to summarize the teaching of the first four chapters of ROMANS. ROMANS 5 goes on to explain in detail the beauty of the grace that God gives to those who believe. Above all, this grace enables a person to experience peace with God. It also produces character and hope. And, it gives people power to live according to the truth that they know. The benefits of God's amazing grace

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are laid out in ROMANS 5. Then, in ROMANS 6, the subject moves from grace to faith. According to Romans 6, saving faith involves the whole person. A person's mind and his emotions and his will must all be engaged in order for that person to experience saving faith. He must know what it means to die to sin and be raised up to newness of life. And, the will must also be involved. There must be a crisis experience where the person commits himself to obeying the truth he knows. And finally, the emotions must respond by giving thanks to God. A man in Christ worships God because he has freed him from being a slave to sin and has made him a slave to righteousness.

ROMANS 5, a whole chapter about grace, followed by ROMANS 6, a whole chapter about faith, give us an entire picture of the two ingredients necessary to produce righteousness. But, this picture will be extremely difficult to accept for the person who has another picture deeply embedded in his mind. The average Jew who would read Paul's letter was convinced that the only way to experience righteousness was by obeying the law. And, it is really impossible for a person to embrace both of these pictures at the same time. One must win out over the other.

The Apostle Paul could understand very well how difficult it would be for a person to switch from believing one way to believing another way. He had made the switch himself, but not without first undergoing a great deal of personal struggle. For this reason, the entire seventh chapter of ROMANS is given over to explaining the original purpose of the law. Paul used his own personal testimony to illustrate how the law reveals sin and condemns sin and even actually entices people to sin. To be married to the law is to experience bondage to guilt and sinful desires. The only way a person can be married to the law and not experience the struggle Paul experienced is to pretend that he is OK when he is anything but OK. That's Jesus what labeled as hypocrisy.

In contrast to the bondage described in ROMANS 7, we read about the Spirit-filled life in ROMANS 8. Although several beautiful doctrines are found in the eighth chapter of ROMANS, most of the chapter is about the Holy Spirit. ROMANS 8 emphasizes the change produced by the Holy Spirit that every man and woman in Christ will (*not might but will*) experience. The change is so radical that it cannot be mistaken for anything else other than what it is. It is eternal life. It is this change—even more than claiming the doctrines—that becomes the foundation for assurance of salvation. ROMANS 8 ends with a celebration of assurance.

It is helpful to review ROMANS 1-8 before we go on to ROMANS 9. All the great truths needed to understand the gospel are found in these eight chapters. These truths are not to be taken lightly. Nothing that man does can change the facts about wrath and grace. History proves that man's feeble attempts to either ignore or reject truth only end in catastrophe.

Last week I heard a schoolteacher from Massachusetts being interviewed on National Public Radio. She is a gay rights advocate who was describing how it is possible for a woman to have sex with another woman. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. But, the frightening thing is that she was planning to teach this to children in her sex education class in the public school. She said that she is not afraid to do so now that the law is on her side (the high court in Massachusetts has ruled that gay marriages are legal). When I heard that interview, my spirit groaned within me (or was it the Spirit of God groaning within me?), and I longed so much for Jesus to come back and put an end to all the sin and wickedness and suffering that is running rampant in our society and in our world.

Obviously the woman being interviewed and countless of other people in our nation do not understand the truth of ROMANS 9. If they did, they would be either trembling with fear or grieving over the certain doom that will come to this great nation of ours. You cannot reject or ignore the moral law of God without experiencing certain consequences. God is sovereign. The truth found in the gospel trumps every human law that was ever written. This is the message of ROMANS 9.

Think again of the context in which this letter was written. Bible scholars conclude that the letter was written about 57 A.D. By 57 A. D., the main concern of the leaders of the

nation of Israel was not the growth of the Christian church. They had much bigger things to worry about. There was violent conflict taking place between Romans who occupied the land and the Jews who lived on the land. But, Rome had the upper hand in the conflict, and in 70 A.D. Jerusalem would be completely destroyed and all of its inhabitants would be killed or deported. When the Apostle Paul wrote this letter, the signs of eminent disaster were already evident.

But, Paul was able to see things from God's point of view. He understood that there was a relationship between his nation's eminent destruction and their ongoing rejection of truth. Not only had they rejected their responsibility to pass the blessing they had received from God on to the Gentiles around them, they had now also rejected the blessing. By rejecting Jesus as Messiah, they had suppressed the ultimate truth and blessing that God can possibly bestow on a human being. Doom was certain and close at hand. And, I am certain the Apostle Paul could feel it in his bones. The knowledge of Israel's eminent destruction was a very heavy burden for him to bear.

In ROMANS 9:1-5, we can get a feel for the heavy burden. Verse 1 and 2 begins by revealing the heavy burden, and verse 3 gives us insight into the intensity of the inner-conflict. Here, we see a man deeply in love with his country. Remember, in ROMANS 8:35, how Paul celebrated the assurance of his salvation? When seen side by side with ROMANS 9:3, we are presented with a paradox. Right after he shares that he is confident that nothing can separate him from the love of God, he is now sharing that, if his own separation from God could somehow save his people from the destruction that is to come, he would have it so. Of course, he knew that no human sacrifice or human effort could alter the principles he had just talked about in ROMANS 8. Those principles had been established before the foundation of the world. So, what he had to share in verse 3 was more of an expression of love for country than it was an expression of real possibility. It is very similar to the love Moses expressed for Israel in Exodus 32:31-33.

Paul did not like the fact that his nation was being rejected by God to receive grace, but he knew that the rejection was inevitable and he needed to explain to the people reading his letter why it was inevitable. Why does God do the things He does? How can we explain the acts of God in Israel's history or in the history of any nation? Starting with verse 5 and in the words that follow, we find the answer to this question.

Two things are going to be required for any one of us here to understand the answer. The first thing is an understanding of God's purposes in history. What is God's overall plan for the human race? If we cannot understand God's purposes, we will never be able to understand the acts of God.

The second thing that will be required of us is to avoid answering questions that cannot be answered. If we try to answer questions that God has not answered for us in the Bible, then we are going to have a hard time understanding the acts of God in human history.

So I will use these points as an outline for my message. Let's first try to understand the overall plan God has for the human race. Then, let us examine the questions that were never intended to be answered on this side of the grave. As we do this, I believe the acts of God in Israel's history and in our own history will begin to fall into place.

First, consider the overall purposes of God for the human race. There are two. One is to reveal truth and the other is to save. God is going to reveal truth and He is going to do it His way. No one is going to stop Him. And, God is going to save. He will save in His own way and no one will thwart Him.

The way God is going to reveal truth is by choosing a person who we know as Abraham to become a channel through whom all the nations of the world will have an opportunity to also receive truth. Through Abraham and his offspring the revelation will progressively increase until we come to Christ who is the ultimate seed of Abraham. Jesus Christ is the final fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham when He said to Him, "Through your seed all nations on earth will be blessed (GENESIS 26:4)."

One of God's purposes for the human race is to reveal truth and this is the way He is going to do it. Israel has been chosen to be the channel through which God intends to reveal truth to all nations.