

“Deep and Wide”

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Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected his people?
 By no means!

I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

2 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew...

29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience,

31 so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.

32 For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

DEEP AND WIDE

Deep and Wide.

I loved singing that song in Vacation Bible School when I was a child.

I had absolutely no idea what it meant, but I loved to sing it.

It was fun to make exaggerated hand motions and sing at the top of our lungs.

But, as I've gotten older, I have come to appreciate the fact that this children's song told the truth.

There really is a fountain flowing deep and wide.

It's the fountain of God's grace.

In the Old Testament God is described as the fountain of living water.

The Psalmist praised God who was “Israel’s fountain”. (Psalm 68:26)

When God’s people wandered in the wilderness, God provided life-giving water.

The prophet Isaiah wrote that when the poor and needy are parched the Lord would open fountains in the valley and make the arid desert a pool of water. (Isaiah 41:18)

God is the source of living water.

CRACKED CISTERNS

But, from time to time God’s people rejected that water.

Jeremiah wrote that the people had forsaken God, the fountain of living water.

And to take the place of this living water, they had dug their “own cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” (Jeremiah 2:13)

The unfaithfulness of God’s people is well documented in Scripture.

Paul, in his struggle to understand why the Israelites have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah turns to those passages.

Not everyone who witnessed the mighty acts of God would put their trust in him.

They sought to make their own way in the wilderness.

Instead, of drinking from the eternal fountain, they sought to dig their own wells.

The results were disastrous.

In the verse that precedes our lesson for today, Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah,

“All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”

(Romans 10:21; cf Isaiah 65:2)

Paul's frustration with the fact that the Israelites had, by and large, rejected Jesus ... the source of living water... is echoed in the frustration of the prophets.

WHAT ABOUT THE ISRAELITES?

So Paul wonders what does this mean.
Have God's people forfeited their birth right?
Is God going to give up on them?

Not at all.
We might be unfaithful.
But, as we said a few weeks ago, "the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever".

We might give up on God.
But, God doesn't give up on us.

And that includes the Israelites, God's chosen people.
Paul offers himself as an example.

He said,

"If God has given up on his people, then why am I leader in the church?

I'm an Israelite.
I'm a descendent of Abraham.

I'm a member of the tribe of Benjamin.
If God hasn't given up on me, then maybe God hasn't given up on his chosen people."

There is a line from A Declaration of Faith, a modern creed that was adopted by the Presbyterian Church for study. This creed states,

"We can never lay exclusive claim to being God's people, as though we had replaced those to whom the covenant, the law and the promises belong.

We affirm that God has not rejected his people, the Jews. The Lord does not take back his promises."

“The Lord does not take back his promises.”

That line is based on this passage.

Paul writes in verse 2 of our lesson,

“God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew ...”

That word “foreknew” can mean “to choose ahead of time”.

So, Paul thinks that the Israelites are still God’s chosen people.

Paul echoes the words of the Psalmist who wrote,

“...the Lord will not forsake his people.

He will not abandon his heritage.” (Psalm 94:12)

Paul says that’s still true.

In Charlottesville the Nazis were chanting, “The Jews will not replace us.”

Well, this passage takes that slogan and turns it around.

Scripture teaches us that we will not replace the Jews! The Jews and their story is essential to understanding our faith.

I would suggest those who reject the Jews should spend some time reading and rereading the 11th chapter of the book of Romans. It’s very clear, but sadly, the church has historically sought to muddy things up.

ELIJAH AND THE FAITHFUL REMNANT

In the verses that follow our lesson for today, Paul refers to a dark day in the history of God’s people.

The King had adopted a pagan wife and a pagan religion. And it looked like the whole country was following suit.

No one dared speak out against this outrage except the prophet, Elijah and he was on the run.

And so Elijah thought that God may as well destroy the country.

In despair the prophet lashed out and said,

“They’ve killed all the prophets and demolished all the altars.

I’m the only one left.”

But, the love of God was not so easily defeated.
God told Elijah,

“You don’t know everything.
It may seem like you’re all alone, but you’re not.
There are still 7,000 prophets in the land who have not bowed to Baal.”

Paul interprets that story this way.
The grace of God is deeper and wider than any of us can imagine.
Even in the worst of times God is working God’s purposes out.

Even in those dark days, there was still a faithful few who were chosen to carry on the work of the Kingdom.

And, Paul said, “That’s still true today.”

The men and women portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures were not perfect.
In fact they were quite flawed.

Paul notes that often they had ears that would not hear, and eyes that would not see.
They had a sluggish spirit, and often their disobedience led to great hardship.

But, even their greatest failures did not defeat the grace of God.

God used their failures as a way to call them back home. The steadfast love of the Lord endured.

STUMBLED BUT THEY DID NOT FALL

Paul was terribly disappointed by the fact that his people, by and large, did not accept the gospel. But, after openly struggling with this for several chapters, he finally asks out loud the question that has been bothering him:

“Does this mean that my people are going to fall?
Does this mean that God has rejected the Israelites forever?”

His answer is clear ... “by no means!”
I translate that “no way, no how!”

Or, “You’ve got to be kidding ... I can’t believe you would ask that question.”

God will never abandon God’s people.
The love of God will not be defeated by anything.

The Apostle tells us that the Israelites had stumbled when it comes to their rejection of Jesus.
But, God was using this as an opportunity to bring salvation to the world.

NO BOASTING FROM WILD OLIVE BRANCHES

Now Paul gets to the point of all this.
He is addressing a largely Gentile church that is starting to take pride in their salvation. They’re thinking that God picked them because they were better than the Israelites.

Not so.
Paul writes,

“You Gentiles shouldn’t think that you have replaced God’s people. You haven’t.

You’re like a wild olive branch that has been grafted into an established olive tree.
You’re the ‘Johnny come lately’s’ of this story.

The history of God’s people forms the basis for your faith. That’s the tree to which your branch is attached.

That story is still important.
It’s your spiritual heritage.

So, don’t boast about your faith.
Your salvation comes through grace alone.

And that means you need to live gracious lives.

That means you need to stand in awe of the goodness of God in all humility.

And you need to look forward to that day when all of God's people have their eyes opened to the power of that grace."

Paul's not sure how it will happen, but he has no doubt that one day it will happen.

One day the grace of God will overcome the divisions that we now experience.

But, until that day we put our hope in the wideness of God's mercy.

NO REGRET

In our lesson for today we read that the "gifts and calling of God are irrevocable."

We could translate this verse, "...he gifts and calling of God are without regret."

Guilt and estrangement are a part of the human condition.

We all feel a sense of regret
We are all imprisoned by our disobedience.

But, God has broken the cycle.
The gifts of God's grace come without regret
... even when we are far less than the people God wants us to be.

God doesn't take back this gift of grace.
The love of God doesn't work that way.

And just to make sure that we get the point God sent His Son into the world.

In Jesus we see a human example of God's great forgiveness.
In Jesus we see mercy that transcends the evil that surrounds us.

DARK DAYS

When we talk about God's future we always (as the apostle Paul put it) "see through a glass darkly." Our view of the future is clouded by the troubles of this day.

Just as Paul was upset by the way his people were acting and how they had rejected God's grace, I must admit that sometimes I'm upset by the way my people are acting:

- Police officers ambushed and killed in our own city.
- People ruthlessly murdered by terrorists ... running over them with cars or stabbing them.
- Nazis and white supremacists marching in the streets.
- Wars and rumors of war.

We don't know what to make of it.

A friend wrote that she thought the only sane people were the ones who refused to watch the news!

Maybe so.

The arc of human history does not go in a straight line.

We will have many days in which we want to just throw up our hands and give up.

But, Paul reminds us that this is not the end of the story. The Bible has a consistent message.

God's mercy can... and will... overcome our disobedience.

Long ago we rejected God and even killed God's own Son.

But, God did not reject us.

Instead, God used this terrible act of disobedience as an opportunity to show mercy.

And ever since that fateful day many who had been far away from God have come near to the throne of grace.

DEEP WATER

Those of us who have experienced the grace of God know in our hearts that this is not the end of the story.

In a world filled with hateful actions and hateful speech, the depths of God's mercy continue to be a source of hope ... living water in a dry and parched land.

And the Bible tells us that one day the water will rise. One day a flood of mercy that will cover the earth. And on that day Paul says,

“All Israel will be saved.”
You can't build a doctrine of salvation on that one verse.

But, it sounds like to me that God is not in the habit of leaving his people behind.

And so we look forward to that day.

In the verses that follow our lesson for today, Paul acknowledges the depth of that mercy and grace. He wrote,

Romans 11:33-36

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

34 “For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?”

35 “Or who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?”

36 For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever. Amen.

In the final analysis the story of God's grace is a holy mystery. Like Job we don't get to question the motives of God because... well... God's God ...and we're not!

One commentator told of renting a pontoon boat on a lake in Texas. It was equipped with a depth finder. And it beeped whenever they were headed toward shallow water and were in danger of running aground.

She said that this might be a good thing for us to be equipped with.

When our thinking is too shallow,
a beep might warn us to leave that place
and go where the waters of God's grace run deep and wide.

It seems that this is what Paul is doing at the conclusion of chapter 11.

Paul has struggled mightily these past few weeks with the fact that the people he loved the most have rejected him and the gospel.

He asked in many different ways ... as often we do in a time of stress ... why?

But, it's as if the apostle's depth finder has finally beeped... and he realized that he was about to run aground.

He tried to see through the dark glass of the future, but he now realizes that it's not going to happen ... at least not now.

And so he heads for deeper waters.
He trusts in God and not in his own understanding.

And maybe that's the thought I want to leave with you this morning.
Don't spend too much time in the shallow water by the shore.

Don't spend too much time ruminating over acts of disobedience and evil and asking, "Why?"
Don't spend time thinking about a past you can't change
...and a future you can't control.

Instead, head for the deeper water of God's grace.
Embrace the mystery of God's will and trust in God's goodness.

The words to our next hymn summarize today's lesson well:

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea.
There's a kindness in God's justice,
which is more than liberty.

There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven.
There is no place where earth's failings
have such kindly judgment given.

For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind.
And the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

If our love were but more faithful,
we would gladly trust God's Word,
and our lives reflect thanksgiving
for the goodness of our Lord.

Or if 19th century poetry is not your thing, just let the words to the children's
song guide you.

Deep and wide.
Deep and wide.
There's a fountain flowing deep and wide.

Your life will never run aground when you travel on the waters of God's
amazing grace.

Amen.