

**Let us pray:** Father of our Lord Jesus, open our hearts by your Holy Spirit, that as we contemplate your word, our minds might be illumined, and we might know you as you are revealed in Rabbi Jesus, our Messiah and brother. Amen.

**We Christians have gotten very lazy in the way we talk about and think about the man we call the Apostle Paul.**

- We imagine Paul as a *Christian*, an energetic missionary of the Christian church.
- We interpret Paul as disdaining Jewish Law and upholding Christ as the freedom from the “legalism” of the Torah.
- We portray Paul as a pivotal leader, guiding “Christianity” away from its Jewish roots and into a new Greek-Gentile religion.

This style of thinking about Paul is, as I said, lazy. Dated. Distortive. Anachronistic.

**Let me give you two examples of how badly we misunderstand Paul:**

- 1) You are no doubt aware of the story of Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. To narrate the high points of the story: Saul, a Pharisee who will eventually be renamed Paul, is a persecutor of the early church. He is attacking and tormenting the Christians out of his zeal for the Torah. He is journeying to Damascus to persecute more Christians, when a light from heaven knocks him to the ground, blinds him, and a voice that identifies itself as Jesus, challenges Saul to stop persecuting Jesus’ followers. Through this episode, ultimately, Saul becomes a follower of Jesus, a preacher of the Gospel, and changes his name to Paul. It’s a familiar story.

Have you ever noticed what this story is labeled in your Bible in Acts chapter 9: *The Conversion of Saul*. Conversion? From what is Saul converting? From Judaism? He’s a devout Jew who thinks he’s found the Jewish Messiah. And to what, might I inquire, *O labeler of Bible stories*, to what is Paul converting? To Christianity? That identity, much less that idea, did not exist in Paul’s time.

Paul certainly has his mind changed in this Damascus Road episode. He certainly encounters Jesus, who becomes his Lord and Messiah, but Paul is as Jewish as he ever was at the end of this episode, and indeed he remains an observant Jew for the rest of his life. We Christians, in our desire to claim Paul for our own, have tended, just as we have done with Jesus, to separate him from his Judaism. Go back and read Paul's letters again: that separation is our addition to the text. Paul may have gained a new vision of Judaism, a new interest in bringing Gentiles into the covenantal people of God, but he never abandons his Jewishness.

- 2) Our second example is from the book we are looking at this morning: the Book of Romans. We Christians, again in our desire to claim this text and its author as part of our camp, have severely misread this book throughout our history.

Let me see if I can characterize for us the typical Protestant, and indeed, the typical Christian, approach to reading Romans, then we'll spend the rest of our time hopefully gaining a better understanding Paul's message in this text.

Most of us have heard the sermons or done the Bible studies on Romans that read this letter as being about personal liberation from sin and the Law.

In this narrative interpretation, Paul's concern is about *sin*. We chart together the most pithy verses of Romans: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) – CHECK, I can memorize that one! "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23) – CHECK!

In this personal-salvation style of reading Romans, the book's argument culminates in Chapter 8, which abounds with pithy theological verses that make great bumper stickers and personal affirmations: "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8, verse 1), "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose" (verse 28), "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (verse 38).

As my pastor growing up put it, “If Romans is the golden crown of Christian theology, Romans chapter 8 is that special, glittering crown jewel, encapsulating all the beauty and depth of Paul’s theology.”

With all due respect to my former pastor, I think Paul would have snickered at this sentiment.

You see, this Christian-centric, personal-salvation centric reading of Romans, actually leaves out the core argument of the book, which we find *after* chapter 8, in chapters 9 through 11.

The Book of Romans is built around a quandary in the Paul’s head. Paul, a Jew, an intellectual inheritor of the Pharisees, and a follower of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, is looking around himself and puzzling over a troubling first-century demographic fact: Why are most of his fellow Jews not joining the Jesus-Messiah movement? Why are the Gentile pagans, Greeks, Romans, outsiders, all jumping on the Jesus train, but so many Jews ignoring the Jewish Messiah? This is what Paul, once he’s laid the foundation of the first 8 chapters, tries to excavate and explore in chapters 9 through 11.

And his argument culminates, not in chapter 8, for all it’s pithiness and beauty, it culminates here, in chapter 11, as he grapples with the question of God’s response to his Jewish sisters and brothers who do not follow Jesus.

“Has God rejected his people?”, the seemingly agonized Paul asks in the first verse. “By no means!”, he shouts back at his own rhetorical question. “I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.”

It seems that some Gentiles, formerly pagans now Christians, in Rome, have gotten too big for their britches. They’re looking at the same demographic realities that are troubling Paul and drawing some self-congratulatory conclusions: “We, Gentiles,” they assert, “we are the ones who’ve inherited the promise and the calling of God. We are God’s special people now. Those Jews who aren’t like Paul, those Jews who refuse the messiahship of Jesus—they are damned. Condemned. Rejected.”

And like a good rabbi, a Jew who knows his scripture, Paul pushes back. He pushes back hard: “You Gentiles think you are special? You are a wild olive branch grafted into the carefully cultivated olive tree that was, that is, Israel. You’re the interlopers here. You’re saved by God’s grace, but don’t get out over your skis. You Gentile followers of Jesus [which, parenthetically, is a group that includes all of us gathered here in this sanctuary who are not Jewish], you think you can replace the Jews, take over God’s promises, supersede the old covenant with Abraham and Moses and Jacob?”

“Do you really think,” Paul continues to us his erring Gentile friends, “that God would abandon his people and his promises? What kind of a God is that? You think that Jesus, a faithful Jewish rabbi, a Torah-follower, would give up on his own people? You Gentiles don’t get to be the root of the tree. You’re grafted in, drawing on the roots of Judaism, dependent on the nourishment that comes through the veins and sinews of Jewish transmission. Don’t ever forget: You’re the interlopers, saved by God’s grace and kindness here, you’re the guests in a home that you did not build, the hangers-on who are somehow included. You can love and follow Jesus, and that’s good, but you don’t get to rip him away from his family. You don’t get to Gentil-ify our Messiah. You don’t get to push aside the Jews and disdain God’s chosen people.”

In his most succinct, statement in chapter 11, in verse 29, Paul says it outright: “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable!” That would not make a good bumper sticker (who uses the word “irrevocable”?), but it’s one of the best statements of Paul’s theology. God hasn’t lost sight of the ball. God isn’t confused, even if Paul himself and all the Gentile Jesus followers are. God hasn’t changed horses in midstream. God can expand God’s family, but God does not abandon members of Gods’ family. “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” We might rebel against the gifts and calling of God, we might fight against God, we might say No to God, but God never says No to us. God rejects our No. “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”

But now you can hear that question thrumming for these 11 chapters, pulsing in Paul’s zealous and Torah-trained Jewish mind, you can hear it crying from his Gentile Roman audience, you can hear it pounding in every interreligious dialogue, every interreligious conflict and war: “WHY? Why would God do it like this? Why would God orchestrate or supervise or allow human history to play out

this way? Why would there be these now-diverging Jewish and Christian trajectories?

“Why would humanity be divided like this? Jew, Gentile, Christian, Muslim, Catholic, Protestant—Why? Why couldn’t God make it simple, clear, easy? Why do we exist as a separated, variegated, warring, religiously divided humanity? Why do some believe and others don’t? Why do some follow Jesus and others don’t? How can God put it all back together again? Is this really the way it was supposed to be?”

And here, at the end of Romans chapter 11, just when the cries of theological anguish have reached a fever pitch. Just in that moment when all of Paul’s ruminations and fears and questions culminate, when his brilliant, rabbinic, theologically adept mind seems ready to offer a final answer, Paul pulls back.

He pivots. He turns from the writing on the page, from gazing quizzically toward heaven, and Paul bows in prayer and worship. Romans 11 ends, not with an answer to all of these swirling theological questions, not with a solution to all of our existential religious doubts. It ends in doxology, which is just a fancy theological way of saying: worship.

<sup>33</sup> *O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

<sup>34</sup> *‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counsellor?’*

<sup>35</sup> *‘Or who has given a gift to him,  
to receive a gift in return?’*

<sup>36</sup> *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.*

Why are we all imprisoned in disobedience? Why are we divided by religion and tradition and ethnicity? Why is the world thus?

Paul’s answer isn’t an answer, but a person. It isn’t a formula, but a pointing in a direction: “Look at God. Do you think you can figure God out? Do you really believe that God owes you an explanation, as if you could fit that explanation in your finite little brain?”

“Our God is inscrutable, yes, but our God is also good. Our God is confusing to us, yes, but our God is perfectly wise. Everything is from God, everything exists through God, and everything is moving back toward God in a cosmic dance, a romance that none of us can step outside long enough to comprehend. We are characters in the story, not its authors, much less its critics. There is no room for pride here. No place for us to rest on our laurels or proclaim our specialness. We are recipients of grace from a God who intends to be merciful to all.”

At the end of the day, Paul’s message in Romans isn’t about personal salvation, though it encompasses that, his message isn’t about the relationship between the Law and the new life of the spirit, though that’s certainly in there: the central question, the provocative challenge of Romans, and, to be fair, of Paul’s entire career is: What is the God of Israel doing now?

And Paul’s answer, if we come to Romans fresh and open to its message, should always surprise us Gentiles at least a little: Paul says, *“I’m not sure. I don’t totally get it.* But the God who is revealed in Jesus is the God of Israel, the God of my people, the God who loves Gentile and Jew alike and who is somehow out to show mercy to every human being past, present and future. That God is worthy of worship, of trust. That is the God in whom we hope, though we are still caught up in the mystery.”

<sup>36</sup>*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.*