

Sermon Notes for 6.07.09 (Draft!)

Gospel Soaked: Romans 11.1-32

Romans 9-11 is a challenging text. Paul is rigorous in his argument and penetrating with his questions. Our philosophy at SCC is to go through these challenging texts rather than to skirt around them. I realize that this makes for some challenging Sunday's but in the end it is best. We have people who are new to the faith and people who've been following Jesus for years and years. Somewhere along the way we have to try and make sure everyone is getting fed. That means we as individuals need to accept that sometimes our text is going to speak more to someone else than to me. That is OK. We're a family. Having said that, there are always some practical lessons to draw from the texts. And today is no different.

The back story here is that Paul is writing to the Roman church. The church is filled with Jews and Gentiles (anybody who is not Jewish). Some interesting historical twists have left the church in flux, first, as it was started by Jews, then as the Jews were tossed out of Rome and then as they were let back in. This upheaval had created some confusion in the community. Add to this the fact that most Jews had rejected Jesus and you can understand why Paul sees it as so important to address the issue in these chapters.

We can relate to this. Israel is still at the center of the progress of human history. Look at the 1800's, the 1900's and even today. Our President was just in the Middle East and still, one of the hot-button issues is the relationship between Israel and the rest of the nations. The modern Christian response has been very interesting. It is estimated that Evangelicals give upwards of \$30 million a year to Israel. There must be something driving this. There is another wing of the Christian community that doesn't see the need to support Israel. So this is relevant. And so far, Paul has been explaining that the reason there is this split is that some have been disobedient have rejected God. Now he'll finish up with two more questions. Did God reject Israel? and Is Israel beyond hope? Essentially, then, what is the future of Israel? Out of this will also come some practical lessons about following Jesus.

Romans 11:1-32 [p. 787]

11:1 Paul gives personal evidence that God did not reject the Jews.

11:2 Theological evidence.

11:3-5a Israel has not been rejected. There is a golden thread of faithfulness.

11:5b-6 Paul keeps going back to his lynchpin. Jews, Gentiles, everyone stands in relationship to God purely on the basis of his grace. The playing field is level. No group can justify elevating itself over another.

11:7-11b Paul is repeating the point of chapter 10. Israel has been given over to her own hardness of heart. Afterwards Paul puts the entire confusing, "unbelieving Jew/believing Gentile question into perspective as it relates to God's overall plan.

11:11c God's last ditch effort to woo Israel is to use envy! It wasn't supposed to be like this. Israel, as a Kingdom of Priests, was supposed to carry the light to all the nations. But they didn't.

11:12 Fullness, given the context, means to receive the grace made available in Jesus Christ. The point is that if their loss is a blessing to the Gentiles, how much more will their gain be? God turns negatives into positives.

11:13-24 It seems the Gentiles are at risk of becoming puffed up about what has happened. Paul uses the analogy of the olive branch to clarify the relationship between Jew and Gentile and to underscore again that relationship to God is a matter of grace.

11:25-32 The section ends with the lynchpin again. The gospel is the key to solving all thorny, challenging issues. Everything comes down to the gospel. The playing field is level. We all need grace. We ought to keep this in mind in any dispute we're having.

A Command: Do not Boast

A large portion of the text is about how the Gentiles should not boast or be arrogant. Their relationship to God is not because they have superior standing. It is based on God's grace. We humans have a tendency to take things that originally came to us as gifts and to turn them into entitlements. We grow accustomed to the gifts, then we start to take it for granted, then we think we actually deserve it and that leads to thoughts of how we must somehow be worthy of the gift in the entitlement sense.

Andy Crouch coined the term “grace babies” to describe people who receive all good things as joyful gifts but never slip into a sense of entitlement with respect to these things. He uses the example of the Harvard students he worked with who’s families were well connected. They developed a sense that they were entitled to Harvard. The grace babies never had a thought of going to Harvard until their school guidance counselor suggested it. Once there, they were continually surprised by the opportunity they’d been given. Crouch marveled that it was the grace babies who thrived best, academically, spiritually, etc.

When people encounter a church person I think the assumption is that we are entitlement people, that somehow we’ve deserved our “churchiness.” You can’t blame them. This is how everything in the world works. Because this is the case, it is not enough just to know on the inside that we’re grace babies. We need to be painfully upfront about it. There needs to be an aroma of grace about us. The aroma comes when we talk about it and when we dispense it towards others. How many times do we say the word “grace” in a day.

Principle: God Turns Loss into Gain

The history is that Israel was called to be a Kingdom of Priests. “And through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed,” God says to Abraham. “You will be for me a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation,” he says. But what happens if Israel does not follow through on her calling? What happens if she disobeys, if she rejects the call? There is a huge loss not only for Israel but for everyone else.

And yet! God is able to turn loss into gain. Many Gentiles received grace through their rejection anyway. Many are still receiving it today. In China, 3000 a day. In Africa the church has gone from 10% in 1900 to 50% now. Then there is South America. The loss has been turned into gain!

If the loss that came from rejection by the Jews, how much more will there be when they accept? This is Paul’s argument. If he can accomplish all this with uncooperative people, how much more when they cooperate? Hold onto your hats!

The point is that God turns loss into gain. Jesus Christ went to the cross and died. God turned it into gain. He offered cleansing from sin by it. Then he raised Jesus from the dead. Can there be any greater example of loss being turned into gain? This is the lesson about the Christian life. God turns loss into gain.

What this means is that we’re to learn to enter loss with an eye to gain. We all experience it. We’re clicking along and everything is going well and suddenly a wrench is thrown in the works. This is what happened to God with Israel. They didn’t carry out his plan. It is the story of ALL humans, Jew and Gentile. But God is so big he can transform loss into gain. He did. He does. Nothing can stop him from accomplishing his goal of redeeming people.

This week we remembered the “loss” that took place in Tiananmen Square 20 years ago. Chuck Colson was at a service in D.C. in which a Chinese Pastor shared what God has brought out of that loss over these 20 years.

Through the June 4 tragedy, Pastor Hong Yujian said, “We see that . . . God prepared the hearts of the people for the widespread dissemination of the Gospel . . . in China.” First, he said, Tiananmen Square “destroyed the last sense of hope the Chinese people had in the idol of communism. The massacre of ordinary people by the government fully exposed the barbarity of a totalitarian government under the rule of man.”

Second, the massacre “Was a blow to the blind spot of self-conceit of intellectual elites in the Chinese tradition.”

Third, he said, “the decline of the student movements and the pro-democracy movement forced us to reflect on a deeper level: what is really the root of all the miseries in the Chinese nation?”

In the past, the Chinese believed the answer was oppression, which they attempted to resist. But under the mighty power of the crackdown by the totalitarian authorities, Yujian said people “demonstrated cowardice, numbness, [and] betrayal.”

“Many people are beginning to realize that they in themselves have nothing praiseworthy,” Pastor Yujian said. “The end of human efforts is the beginning of God. . . . The only way out is coming to the throne of grace of God and surrendering to Him.”

How has God used the Tiananmen tragedy to build his Church? Before the massacre, the house churches were mainly in the countryside, Pastor Yujian noted. But after June 4, the churches “spread to urban areas and into intellectual circles.” In these arenas, in the aftermath of the massacre, students were suffering from a sense of passiveness, depravity, and loss—but then they began to listen seriously to what house church pastors had to say.

In other countries, Chinese churches and Bible classes had previously been attended mainly by immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan. But after Tiananmen Square, people began to reach out and show their care and love to students from mainland China. “As a result,” Pastor Yujian said, “there was an upsurge for God among the students from mainland China.”

Out of the ashes of Tiananmen Square, and the failure of the student movement, its leaders began a search for truth—and ultimately have “found hope and reality in Jesus Christ.” [Breakpoint, June 5, 2009]

God turns loss into gain.