

Sermon for Sunday, June 20, 2010
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THE CRUX OF HUMAN HISTORY
Romans 9:14-33

Back in the summer of 2008, there was a major donnybrook between the U.S. and Russia over Russia's military conflict with Georgia in the region of South Ossetia. The Russians were blaming the west for encouraging Georgian aggression in the region. The U.S. was accusing Russia of unjustifiable attacks on Georgia. There were threats. It was ugly.

Well, as the hostilities came to an end, former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev wrote an op-ed in the New York Times. Halfway through, he wrote:

“Russia has long been told to simply accept the facts. Here's the independence of Kosovo for you. Here's the abrogation of the Antiballistic Missile Treaty and the American decision to place missile defenses in neighboring countries. Here's the unending expansion of NATO. All of these moves have been set against the backdrop of sweet talk about partnership. Why would anyone put up with such a charade?”

There is much talk now in the United States about rethinking relations with Russia. One thing that should definitely be rethought: the habit of talking to Russia in a condescending way, without regard for its positions and interests.”¹

Ouch! I'm no expert on U.S.-Russia relations, but my favorite fiction writers are Russian—Fyodor Dostoevsky and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. And I can recognize some good Old Russian Fatherland pride when I read it.²

It seems to me that part of our problem is that we think the Russians are our buddies.³ Now we're the same. Now we're buddies. But, of course, we aren't.

In Romans 9, Paul is wrestling with a very similar problem. Before his conversion, Paul, along with many of his contemporaries, had a “buddy” view of God. They simply assumed that God was on Israel's side. And, therefore, since God is on Israel's side, he should have done for Israel what Paul and his contemporaries expected him to do.

“We're Israel. God is on our side.” Paul says, “Ummmm, No.” “God chooses the sides and you need to figure out how to be on His side.” He makes this point by giving us little lessons from Israel's past and present history.

¹ Mikhail Gorbachev, “Russia Never Wanted a War,” The New York Times, August 19, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/20/opinion/20gorbachev.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Gorbachev%20op%20ed&st=cse

² Ron Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World*, writes, “This was the clash between a 21st-century Western world that saw the extension of democratic integration closer to Moscow's borders as a positive step toward greater stability and a Russia that was returning to the habits of 19th-century great power thinking and viewed it as a threat.” Adam Daniel Rotfeld, “Little War, Big Consequences: The West needs a new Russia strategy,” The Wall Street Journal, February, 27, 2010 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703315004575073800980792146.html>

³ . Perestroika and Glastnost, *Democracy, Capitalism, and Freedom*.

Paul's point here is simple: This is God's Story. He is the one who is writing it. The question for us is: How do we find our place in God's story?

1. The Theme of Israel's History (1-18)
2. The Crisis of Israel's History (19-29)
3. The Crux of Israel's History and Human History (30-33)

1. The Theme of Israel's History (1-18)

Dan covered a big chunk of this section in detail last week, so I'm just going to point out a few things as they relate to Paul's overall argument in chapter 9.

The theme of Israel's History is: **God's mercy comes through His promise.** Paul illustrates this in three ways:

A. Not physical descent. B. Not primogenitor. C. Not earthly power.

A. Not physical descent (Isaac)

Look at verse 8:

⁸ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. ⁹ For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

God's mercy comes, not through physical descent, but through God's promise. God's mercy would flow through Isaac and not through Ishmael, though Ishmael was Abraham's first physical descendent and thirteen years older than Isaac.

God, to emphasize the point, waits until Abraham and Sarah are extremely old, decades past childbearing years, to give Isaac, the promised son. Don't miss the point. This boy, the promise bearer, comes from God.

B. Not primogenitor (Jacob)

In traditional societies, the first born received most of the privileges and responsibilities. So it would have been expected for Esau, Isaac and Rebekah's first-born twin, to be the recipient of God's promise. But that wasn't what happened. Look at verse 10,

¹⁰ Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. ¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad-- in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls-- she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

God's mercy comes, not through primogenitor, the right of the firstborn, but through God's promise, His choice. He decides who the bearer of His promise will be. Don't miss the point. Even a swindler and a crook like Jacob can be a vessel of God's mercy.

C. Not power (Pharaoh)

Paul's next illustration of the theme comes from Moses' conflict with Pharaoh.

¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

Pharaoh, perhaps the most powerful man in all the world at that moment, was nothing in comparison to the God who is determined to show mercy to Israel, according to His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact, Pharaoh's dependence on his unprecedented political power, instead of saving him from Israel and her God, actually ensured his doom.

Now, each of these examples raises a number of questions in our minds:

- What does all this mean?
- What does it mean that God hardened Pharaoh's heart?
- Is that fair?

Those are important questions, and Dan is going to be addressing them in more detail next week. My job is to help you get the big picture. Do you see what all of these illustrations have in common?

D. The Point: God's saving power is paradoxical

God saves in unexpected ways in order to demonstrate *the weakness of human strength* and *the overwhelming power of divine weakness*.

Each of these illustrations magnify *God's paradoxical, weak power*.

- Abraham and Sarah, bodies as good as dead, with God's help, have a son, Isaac. This boy, not Abraham's eldest son Ishmael, will be the bearer of God's promise. Promise, not physical descent.
- Jacob, the second born, the swindler and cheat, not Esau the first-born, Isaac's favorite. Jacob, not Esau, is the bearer of God's promise. Promise, not primogenitor.
- The slave nation, Israel, through the strength of her God, defeats the mighty Pharaoh. Promise, not political power.

Salvation is given by God, and it is given in the way that He chooses. And God usually prefers the weak over the strong, the powerless over the powerful, the poor over the rich.

That's not to say that the strong, the powerful, and the rich can't be saved. It's just to say that they can't be saved on their own terms. The human race can't be saved on its own terms.

Why? Because God is trying to teach us that He is the *Savior* and we are not. He is God and we are not. Your human heritage doesn't count. Your human privileges don't count. Your political power doesn't count. What counts is that God has mercy.

2. The Crisis of Israel's History (19-29)

Any careful observer of the behavior of children knows that often, when kids hurt themselves, they blame their parents. This is especially true for strong-willed kids.

I experienced this personally this spring as my wife and I tried to help my six year old learn how to ride a bike without training wheels. Here is how a typical session went.

We made sure the bike was safe. We equipped Charlie with the right safety gear. We gave Charlie a few, carefully chosen tips.

“Don’t lean too much.” “Don’t jerk the wheel.” “Keep pedaling.” “If you feel like you’re losing control, hit the brakes and put your feet down to stop.”

He would say, “Whatever, Dad.” I would give him a little push, and he would promptly ignore all of my coaching resulting in a spectacular crash.

The first words out of his mouth: “DAD, it’s your fault!”

Paul’s imaginary Israelite debate partner is in exactly the same position. He’s playing the blame game. There’s a crisis in Israel, and he’s saying it’s all God’s fault.

A. The Crisis—Israel is resisting God’s will

Now that God’s promised salvation has arrived, many in Israel don’t want it. So, there is a crisis in God’s relationship with Israel. “Is God abandoning Israel? How can this be?”

Look at verse 19:

¹⁹ One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"

So, “Who resists his will?” is at least partially ironic. You do. Israel, by rejecting Jesus, is resisting God’s will. But this will not defeat God’s purposes, globally.

Paul concedes the main point of the blame-shifter: ultimately, no one can resist God’s will. But He doesn’t accept the implied criticism of God in the question. Those who choose their own path over God’s will be revealed as objects of God’s wrath. Those who receive God’s gift of the Savior Jesus will be revealed as objects of God’s glory.

Look at verse 20:

²⁰ But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? ²² What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath-- prepared for destruction? ²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory-- ²⁴ even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

Those last two verses are the key to this section of Paul’s argument. We should read them again:

²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory-- ²⁴ even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

Do you see it? Israel's rejection of her Messiah has led to salvation for the Jews and for the Gentiles!

Paul illustrates these points emphatically with quotations from Hosea and Isaiah:

²⁵ As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," ²⁶ and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

²⁷ Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. ²⁸ For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality." ²⁹ It is just as Isaiah said previously: "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah."

These quotations make Paul's twin points clearly. The Gentiles, through their faith in Israel's Messiah Jesus, are now being called "sons of the living God." The mercy of God's promised Messiah is not just for Israel; it is for the whole world. Yet, many in Israel, as Isaiah foretold, have rejected God's mercy in Jesus.

I hope you can see the beauty but also the solemn warning in these words. I'm sure there are some of you here this morning who feel like you don't fit in the church. There are many reasons to feel like an outsider. Your politics don't match those of the crowd. Your vocation is not well-represented in the church. You don't look the same. You talk differently. You come from a different background, a different race or socio-economic background than most in the crowd.

What Paul is saying is simple, "None of those differences matter. God's offer of mercy and grace in Jesus is for you. Take him into the center of your life. You don't have to become like everyone else. God will make you the best version of yourself."

The warning is for those who are comfortable in the church. It's for those who are used to the prayers, used to the traditions, used to the stories. Paul is saying, "None of your privileges, none of your traditions, none of your beloved Bible stories, none of your prayers. None of those things matter if you reject Jesus."

In fact, your religious observance is a great danger for you. Showing up here at church you may think that somehow God is pleased with all of the things you do. But He is not. He doesn't just want your religious observance. He wants you. He wants you to know His Son, and through His Son to become not just someone who does religious stuff, but someone who really knows and loves Him and others.

Ask yourself, "Why am I here? And, if your answer doesn't include the name of Jesus, ask yourself again: Why am I here?"

2. The Crux of Israel's History and Human History (30-33)

Look with me beginning in verse 30:

³⁰ What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹ but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. ³² Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone." ³³ As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

There is no path to God apart from God. Christianity says, "This is what God has done. This is what God is doing. There is no other way to participate in the story than to receive and live based on this."

Why did Israel stumble? Why do people stumble?

The stumbling stone is ugly but Beautiful. Israel was scandalized by the weakness of their king: Pride. Our righteousness is in our privileges, in the Law. If we just do these things, God will be on our side. God says, "No."

Our stumbling stone: self-salvation strategies. The right education, right job, right spouse, right house, right neighborhood, good kids...

Can you see the beauty of what God has done?

The strong God, the sovereign Lord became weak for us. The weak, crucified God emerged victorious in life.

Whether you are weak or strong, it doesn't matter. God's weakness is far stronger than our strength. Jesus is the Crux of human history. He is the stumbling block for the proud and the refuge of the humble.

The proud stumble. The humble rejoice and are not put to shame.