

Romans 9:1-6 Paul's heart for unbelieving Israel

In this month's Girton Parish News Iris writes:

"We are living in momentous times, when so many norms seem spooked, and instability, like a bolting horse, kicks the political landmarks up in the air. We are relentlessly reminded that uncharted waters lie ahead, and despite our best efforts to take counsel from so-called experts, we discover weasel words and shifting plans of action. Small wonder then that we may be viewing the landscape of the future with trepidation and anxiety. We need to be able to cultivate hope and stand in a centre of calmness not built on false dreams but firmly grounded in faith in a living, wise, Sovereign God. We need reassurance that we are not stumbling blindly into a quagmire of uncertainties, relying on untested notions of governance."

Iris continues to say that, as King George 6th said, we need to put our hands into the hand of God. We need to look to the example of Abraham, the man of faith.

We are indeed living in momentous times, and God is shaking the nations. Yet we worship a God who cannot be shaken! As uncertain as times may be we have a certain faith, and it is in such times that we need to be salt and light to our unbelieving families and communities (see Philippians 2:15-16).

There are so many around us who are, "stumbling blindly in to a quagmire of uncertainties." In Romans 9-11 it was unbelieving Jews who were stumbling, and refused to accept Jesus the light of the world. If you meet a person who is stumbling around what do you do? Push them over completely, or help them up? God has a heart of compassion for those who are deaf and blind (Leviticus 19:14), and this includes the spiritually deaf and blind. But why had Israel, God's people, rejected their Messiah? Had in fact in some way God failed? (Romans 9:6).

This was a big question among the early believers. It wasn't just theoretical either. At the time of writing Romans, and at this early stage the believers in Jesus were still meeting in the synagogues. They were literally rubbing shoulders with unbelieving Jews. A split came, but not until later.

The question as to why some reject Jesus as Messiah isn't an easy one for us either. Sometimes it's as if there is an invisible wall which is impossible to break through. We ask, "Lord, why this blindness?" Yet we mustn't give up. We must continue to pray and sow the seed because in God's good time there will be a harvest.

God promised that this will be so for Israel. At the end of this section Paul underlines this point,

Rom 11:26-7 *All Israel will be saved. As it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins."*

Even though Israel broke the covenant God remains faithful and He will fulfil his promises to Israel.

This should give us encouragement not to give up on our loved ones, friends and neighbours, and our nation (1John 5:14-15).

In chapter 9 Paul is picking up where he left off in chapter 3,

Romans 3:1-2 *What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very oracles of God.*

The oracles of God (the Scriptures) in the first century were divided into the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Nevi'im) and the Writings (Ketuvim). Although Torah referred to the first 5 books of the Bible it was used in a wider sense to include all the Scriptures. This is why Paul can quote from the Psalms and call it the Law (Romans 3:19).

In 9:4-5 Paul gives a longer list of the gifts and privileges given to Israel. They were the foundation for the blessing which would come to all nations. Although most Jews in the first century didn't believe, God didn't and hasn't withdrawn His calling and gifting from his ancient people Israel.

Romans 11:28-29 *As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes. For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.*

Even though Israel were/are 'enemies' they were/are still God's elect. If God changed His mind about Israel what makes us think he won't change His mind about us!

Let us look at the gifts given to Israel. 1) *To whom belongs the adoption as sons*: corporate Israel was elect as God's firstborn son. Paul doesn't say, *To whom belonged but, To whom belong*. 2) *And the glory*: the very glory and presence of God (the Shekinah) which dwelt in the tabernacle and in Solomon's Temple. 3) *And the covenants*: we tend to think of an Old and New Covenant. However there are a number of covenants in the 'Old' Testament, such as the covenants with Abraham, Israel at Sinai, and David. In fact, even the New Covenant is included in the 'Old' Testament (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Together these covenants are the vehicle by which God has revealed his plan of redemption. 4) *And the giving of the law*: Paul clearly understood the Law to be God given. 5) *The temple service*: which represented the true worship of God. 6) *And the promises*: the promises given to Abraham, and the prophets, concerning the coming Messiah, the outpouring of the Spirit, and the coming kingdom of God. 7) *Whose are the patriarchs*: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. 8) *And from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh*: that is Jesus!

The point is that even in unbelief God did not and has not withdrawn his gifts and calling from Israel. This should encourage us that God's plan for us depends not on us, but entirely on God's faithfulness. Nevertheless we will miss out on God's blessings if we turn away in unbelief. That Israel was in unbelief was a source of great grief to Paul.

Romans 9:1-3 *I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.*

This is similar to the way Jesus felt when he wept over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-42).

In chapter 8 Paul pointed out that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus. Yet a few moments later he wishes himself separated, if only it could in some way achieve salvation for his own people Israel. That is a burden for souls! Paul felt something of God's love for Israel (Hosea 11:1-2). Unfortunately, by and large, this heart for God's people Israel has not been shared by the church, and we can say that anti-Semitism in the church, historically and today, has been nothing but a disgrace.

But God's love extends to the whole world (John 3:16). Do we feel something of God's heart for loved ones, friends and neighbours? This only begins in prayer. My prayer is that at the beginning of 2017 God would work in our lives in a new and deeper way to give us a heart for prayer. I pray also that God will stir up the gifts in us, which he won't take away(!), but can lie dormant and unused. This is vital in these days as I think it is probably not an exaggeration to say that God is preparing His people for the coming of the Lord!