

## God's Greater Story - People of the Promise

Text: Romans 9:1-13 - August 2, 2020

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### Introduction:

You may have seen it before, on a laminated card in a Christian bookstore or on the back page of a bible in a hotel room. It's a listing of passages to look up in the bible when you are in need of a word from God. On the left hand side of the card are different situations in life. "When you worry . . . when you feel alone . . . when you struggle with temptation . . . when you have financial trouble." Then, on the right hand side of the card are the passages that you should look up for each situation. So, "When you are worried" you are directed to look up 1 Peter 5:7 and there you read, "Cast all your anxieties on God, because he cares for you." It's a quick, easy way to find a bible passage that speaks to you. The last thing you want, when a person is worried, is for her to open the bible and read about God striking Ananias and Sapphira dead in their tracks or God sending bears to kill 42 children for mocking the prophet Elisha. It's much safer to open the bible to one single verse, pre-selected, and begin reading there.

While this listing of passages can indeed be comforting and has brought many people a word from God who otherwise would be lost when they open the bible, the difficulty is that sometimes people never get beyond this kind of reading of the bible. They open the pages. They find a comforting word. But then they set the bible aside and they never find themselves entering through this door into the deeper, richer story of Scriptures.

Christianity becomes something it was never intended to be. A private, personal religion. It becomes something you turn to not when you enter the world but when you retreat from it. It's something you read in your private devotional time and you look forward to that moment when it is "just me and Jesus." God becomes something like our best friend, a person who supports us when times get tough, and someone who helps us accomplish our plans and fulfill our dreams. The

problem, of course, is that we have reversed roles with God. Rather than us being servants in God's kingdom, God becomes a servant in ours. Rather than us being brought into God's greater story, God is brought into ours.

In our sermon series, we have turned our attention to God's greater story and we have seen the main actor in that story – not us, but God. God is the one who was there at the beginning, creating this world and all of the cosmos; and God is the one who will be there at the end, bringing about a new and glorious recreation. In between the beginning and the end, God is here, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, working in love and ruling over ruins. At this point in the sermon series, we are going to see how God's greater story involves a greater people, God's greater people. While God certainly is present there for every individual person, able to be found in a small bible passage a person reads when lonely in a hotel room, God's vision is much greater than that. God has come in Jesus

Christ not only to save you and each person in the entire creation but also to join you to a people, a people who live by his promise and for his purpose in his kingdom. This is what the apostle Paul reveals in our text and this is what God calls us to rejoice in today.

## **I. Text: Paul's Prayer and the People of the Promise**

As you listen to our text this morning, you realize that we have come across Paul in a very private moment. Paul is engaged in prayer. His prayer is powerful and personal and very very painful. I don't know if you have ever come before God on behalf of someone you love, someone you care about, and yet someone who will have nothing to do with the faith. You love that person. You know that God loves that person. And you know that God would desire that person to be saved and yet that person wants nothing to do with God. And so you stand there, alone, not because you don't believe in God. You believe in God. But you are alone because you stand there without your friend, your mother, your son who has walked away from the faith. If you have ever been there, you have a very small clue of what the apostle Paul is experiencing. This is a very private moment. A very personal and painful prayer.

Paul cries out, "I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit – that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

Paul is concerned about his brothers, his kinsmen, the Jewish people. Five years ago, the Jewish people had been expelled from Rome. The Emperor Claudius was attempting to maintain law and order in the city. There had been civil unrest and so he acted as previous emperors had done (Tiberius in 19 AD) and expelled the Jews from Rome. The expulsion was limited to the Jews and the expulsion was limited to Rome. When Claudius died, his expulsion died with him. The Jewish people were now returning to Rome and yet, the question was, how would the church receive them? What had begun as a movement of faith among the Jews was now predominantly Gentile. The Jews had left but the church had remained and grown with Gentile believers. Paul was worried, not only about the Jews who did not believe but also about the Gentiles who may not see any reason to care about the Jewish people.

Earlier in the letter, Paul asked a very important question. As he revealed that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Paul asked, "Then what advantage has the Jew?" We would expect Paul to say, "none." That is, "all are sinful and all are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ." Therefore, there is no advantage to being a Jew. But, surprisingly, Paul says something different. "What advantage has the Jew?" Paul asked. His answer was "much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God." That listing that Paul began in Romans 3, he continues now in Romans 9. Listen as Paul reveals the blessings of God upon Israel: "They are Israelites, and to them

belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.”

Paul is engaged in a moment of prayer, very personal and very private, and yet notice how his prayer is wrapped up in the larger story of God. Paul is not praying for himself but for God’s people. Paul is not setting before God his day and his plans and asking for God’s blessing. No, Paul finds God’s greater story set before him and is praying for fulfillment of what God has planned. God has chosen Abraham to be the father of his people and from Abraham God has chosen to bless not only his people but all nations on the face of the earth. From Abraham and his descendents, according to the flesh, comes Christ and Christ is the one in whom Israel and all nations of the earth are blessed. Paul knows this greater story of God and this story shapes Paul’s life and prayer.

What is amazing is that Paul in prayer is caught up in the heart of God’s story. Notice how Paul is willing to die for the sake of the Jews. Paul knows that not all of his Jewish brothers and sisters have believed in Jesus. Because of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome, it would be very easy for the Christian church to become a Gentile church, that does not see or value or care about Israel. And so Paul finds himself overwhelmed with pain and personal love and he wishes that he himself could be cut off from Christ, if that could save the Jewish people. Here, Paul’s heart is filled with the love of Jesus. Jesus is the very one who was willing to be cut off from God, who was willing to drink the cup of his Father’s wrath, who was willing to be forsaken by God and condemned to hell, that the kingdom of God might be opened to all people who trust in him. In him is forgiveness, life, and everlasting salvation. In him is the promise that your sins are forgiven and that you are now part of the people of God, people who live by that promise as part of God’s greater story.

This is what the apostle Paul is doing in his prayer. He is living by that promise, letting God’s greater story, God’s greater vision, shape his prayer and his life in self-sacrificial love.

## **II. Application: Our Lives as People of the Promise**

How does this relate to us today? Consider how Paul reminds us that we are part of a greater people brought into the greater story of God. Sometimes we can lose sight of this larger story. Faith can become a personal matter, something that we reduce to a private experience to help us get through the week. Paul awakens us this morning to the fact that we are part of a people, a much greater people, who live by the promise of God.

A Lutheran pastor once took part in an evangelism experience in Israel. He worked with a leader named Bodil from the Caspari Center in Jerusalem. Their work focused on supporting small communities of faith among Jewish people in Jerusalem. At one point, the pastor listened in as Bodil talked with a Jewish woman who did not believe in Christ. The woman asked Bodil why she was so concerned. “After all, you have your bible and you have your Jesus and I

have my Scriptures and I have my God. Why do I need to believe in your Jesus? Why can't we both just believe in God?" Bodil looked at the woman and she said, "If my Jesus isn't your Messiah, then I don't want him. Your Scriptures are my Scriptures and your God is my God," she said. "And if Jesus is not your Messiah, then I don't want him and I will wait for the one God has promised." The pastor was surprised by Bodil's answer.

For years, the pastor had looked at the Old Testament Scriptures as helpful for proving that Jesus was God. He would pick and choose among passages – Isaiah 9, "to us a child is born" or Isaiah 53, "he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" – and help people see how these passages talked about Jesus. But, when it came down to it, he was much more comfortable reading the New Testament. The Old Testament was helpful for pointing to Jesus, but he'd much rather focus on the gospels and the epistles of Paul. Sermons rarely worked with the Old Testament. Bible classes were the same way. How strange then to hear Bodil's answer. Bodil started with the Old Testament. These were her Scriptures. These were her words from God. And if Jesus didn't fulfill these Scriptures then she would hold on to the Old Testament and wait for the Messiah God promised.

While the woman Bodil talked to did not come to the faith that day, the pastor who overheard her was brought to a deeper belief. He began to see how God had brought him into a much larger story. It was the story of God's work through a people in this world. This God who created all things called forth a people. To them he gave promises. To them he sent prophets. And now, this pastor, in Christ, was part of this people in the body of Christ, the church. The prophets were not simply books he turned too looking for a passage that he might relate to Jesus. Rather, now, he began to read them and see the larger vision and glory of God. Yes, that vision was centered in Jesus but it was much richer and fuller than the pastor had known.

Consider the Old Testament reading this morning. God's call to his people to come and eat. This is more than a foretaste of the feeding of the 5,000. This is part of God's eternal vision of a banquet for all peoples. God speaks of an everlasting covenant made with David. He is a witness and leader and commander for the peoples. Through him, Israel will call nations they know not and nations that did not know them will run to them. Suddenly, we begin to see a much larger table and a much greater feast for all people and all time. We begin to overhear God's promises throughout the Old Testament to feed and care for his people. From the manna that falls from heaven to the rocks the flow with water in the wilderness, from the table that the Lord our shepherd prepares to the teaching that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" to the table that wisdom sets for her people.<sup>11</sup> This banquet lies behind the banquet parables of Jesus and this banquet, this eschatological feast in the kingdom of God, lies ahead of all of us, as part of God's people, gathered from all nations, who live by the promises of God. Rather than open the bible and try to use God in our lives, we find that God opens the Scriptures and brings us into his story and the life of his people in this world.

## **Conclusion:**

There is a painting that captures what this looks like. It used to be there on an altar in Sienna. It was one of five small paintings at the very bottom of the altarpiece. You normally wouldn't see it if you were seated further back in the church. If you came forward, however, for communion, you could see this small painting of a moment in the work of God for this world.

The painting was of the annunciation. That moment when Mary received word from the angel Gabriel that she was chosen to bear the Savior. Mary is seated, alone, in a room. There is nothing in that room to distract her. In fact, she could easily have been at prayer. Before her stands an angel, Gabriel, bearing a message from God. When you look at the painting closely, however, there is something amazing. Rather than paint the scene realistically, the artist has taken this story and placed it in a much larger story of God's work in the world. As you look outside the house where Mary is sitting, you see a garden. This is not any garden, however. It is the Garden of Eden. The artist has taken Mary and this house where she is praying and placed it on the edge of the Garden of Eden. There, outside her window, are Adam and Eve. The scene is a sad one. You see God the Father banishing Adam and Eve out of the Garden. They have sinned against God and brought his wrath upon all of creation and now they are subject to death and must live in a fallen world. As God the Father extends his arm to banish them from the garden, however, something beautiful happens. If you follow God's arm, you see that God is pointing from that Garden to the Virgin Mary sitting in this room. God sends Adam and Eve out of the Garden but he does so with a promise – that there will come a day when the woman will have an offspring who will bruise the head of Satan and rescue his people from sin.

Adam and Eve and all of those who lived after them, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, David and Solomon and Isaiah and Malachi, were people of this promise. And now, here in this small room, in this private moment of prayer, God brings Mary into this story and in her words of love and self-sacrifice, "Behold I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word," God continues his greater story of bringing about salvation in this world. Mary in that moment of prayer did not try to use God as a servant in her plans. No, she humbly offered herself as a servant in his. Her private prayer was a moment when God brought her into the story of his people. It was true for Mary. It was true for the apostle Paul in Romans. And it is true for you, this day. As you come to this altar to receive a foretaste of God's eternal feast, come rejoicing that God has chosen to bring you into his larger story, to be part of a people who live by his promise and, with self-sacrificial love, seek to serve him in the world. Amen.