

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. ⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

⁶ It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 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." (Romans 9:1-9)

See Israel for What it Is

What do you think of Israel? That's kind of a loaded question, isn't it? In American politics, Israel is either the hero or the villain. Last week, I passed several signs on people's property that said, "Support Israel!" Yet, it wouldn't be hard in the city of Detroit to find people who believe that the nation of Israel is a bunch of war criminals. What do you think? Obviously, we might hear a number of different opinions this morning and we haven't come here to engage in a political debate. But how we view Israel is an important spiritual question. In the past, for many Christians, Israel's role was limited to being the murderers of Jesus. We Christians need to recognize the long history of calling Jewish people "Christ killers." That certainly contributed to stereotyping Jews as money grubbing Shylocks. On the other hand, many conservative Christians view the Jews from a millennial standpoint. They believe that the Jews are a kind of ruling class in heaven, that before Christ comes back, there will be a mass conversion of the Jews and that in the end, the Antichrist will wage war against Israel and we need to be on Israel's side. So where should we stand? St. Paul actually spends the better part of three chapters in the book of Romans talking about the relationship between the Christian Church and the nation of Israel. The verses before us today begin that discussion. It has nothing to do with politics. At no time does Paul hold out the hope of a mass conversion of the Jews or call us to fight a war on their behalf. Nor does he in any way justify racial stereotypes against them. Today, he calls us **to see Israel for what it is.**

I.

It's interesting that St. Paul begins his discussion of Israel where we might begin: with a defense of his own attitudes toward the Jews. For Paul, all his feelings and all his words about the Jews come down to a discussion of eternal life: will they have it and how have they contributed to us having it? My friends, **see Israel for what it is: the source of our salvation.**

Paul did need to begin with a defense – or at least an explanation – of his attitude toward the Jews because he spoke out so often against them and their legalistic attitude. Sometimes, he used very harsh language. So he wanted to make clear what his true feelings were for Israel. Now, he was not being politically correct. Paul was writing to the congregation in Rome which was made up mostly of gentiles, probably Romans. And the Romans had a very deep dislike for the Jews. They used racial slurs and insults against them. Eventually, their army would destroy Jerusalem. There was nothing for Paul to gain by pretending that he had positive regard for the Jews.

So why did he explain his true feelings? Paul was talking to Christians. We Christians need to adopt God's perspective on Israel. So what was Paul's attitude? He says, **"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel."** Paul was truly sad for them. In fact, if God would allow things like that, Paul would gladly have gone to hell himself if it would've gotten the people of Israel into heaven. Why was Paul sad? Because his own people had rejected Jesus. And there is only one thing that can result from rejecting the Savior: hell. To Paul, knowing that the people he had grown up with and learned from were going to hell was a tragedy.

But there was more to it than simply love for his own people. He says, **"Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.**

Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.” Everything that we are as Christians comes to us from God through the Jews. God adopted them at Mt. Sinai as his own people. God appeared to them in glory over and over again throughout their history. God gave them the covenants. Not just the Mt. Sinai covenant of law. Long before that, God gave Abraham the covenant of grace. God promised that through Abraham all nations on earth would be blessed – which meant Jesus – and again and again, God promised that the Messiah would come and fulfill that blessing. And then, God did give the Mt. Sinai covenant with all its special rules and sacrifices, all of which were really pictures of Jesus. But also in that covenant, God gave them laws: the Ten Commandments and pages and pages of other laws, designed to strike the hearts of sinners and show them how much they need Christ. God gave them all that and then, when the time was right, God gave Israel its greatest gift of all: Jesus.

Jesus was a Jew. Of course, he was not only a man. As Paul says, he was God over all, forever praised. The Son of God is truly God. But God the Father’s plan to save the world was to have his Son take on a real human nature, to be born of a virgin, to live and die and rise again in our place here. God could’ve chosen any people to provide that human nature. Jesus could’ve been black or Asian or American Indian or even Caucasian like most of us. But God chose Israel to provide the human ancestry of our Savior.

Then God had Jesus live his entire life in Israel. So it was tragic that Israel rejected him. It filled Paul with sadness and with a desire that they would come to see the truth. All the negative statements he makes focus either on that rejection, or on the efforts of the Jewish people to stop the preaching of the gospel and the persecution of the Church which they caused. Paul does condemn his own people again and again, but because they tried to save themselves instead of trusting in their Savior and because they tried to stop others from hearing about that Savior.

Paul was also a Jew. He was writing about people he knew and attitudes he experienced – and even shared at one point in his life. How much of his attitude should we share today? No matter what you might hear, Paul was not a bigot. There is no room in the Christian Church for anti-Semitism. There is no room for any kind of racial bigotry. For us to look down on Jews or blacks or Asians or Hispanics because they’re a different race or speak a different language or speak English in a different way, would be sin. The same is true when members of those groups resent us for our skin color or way of talking. Christ came for all sinners everywhere. He lived a perfect life in the place of every single human being who will ever live. He died for us all. He rose to set us all free. If we have a gut level dislike of Jews or blacks or Arabs or Hispanics, if we use racial slurs and tell smug little stories and treat them all as if they shouldn’t be here in our country, that is a complete lack of love. That sin deserves hell.

But Jesus did come for all people and he that means he did come for us. Jesus died even for that total lack of love. Jesus rose from the dead and took away all that we are guilty of. God has forgiven us even for the sin of bigotry. And God calls us to change our attitude and to love all people as Christ has loved us. Speaking specifically of the Jews, God used them to give us the greatest gift we will ever have. Every writer of the Bible – including the New Testament – was a Jew. Our Savior himself was a Jew. How can we slander and hate them? Treasure the heritage of grace that comes to us from God’s Old Testament people and pray for their conversion. It is tragic that so few people of Jewish descent want to hear about Jesus. But until our Lord comes back, we can reach out to people of every nation, including the Jewish people and we can pray that God would bring them to faith and give them the eternal life that Jesus won for them.

II.

That promise of Christ fulfilled in the land and history and people of Israel is what the gospel is all about. Indeed, it’s what every chapter of the Bible is about. It’s why we still read the Old Testament. God took a nation of slaves and made them his own so that Christ would come. **See Israel for what it is: the people of the promise.**

Paul said, **“It is not as though God’s word had failed.”** What did he mean by that? Well, Jewish teachers in Paul’s day made the same mistake that millennialists make today. They thought that God had promised that the physical nation of Israel would always be his people and that the key to entering heaven was obeying laws like circumcision and the Sabbath and the purity laws. But Paul said, **“It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.”** Just having a Jewish genealogy does not make you Jewish in God’s sight. Even in the Old Testament, God distinguished between those Jews who listened to him and those who didn’t. Paul underlines his point with a few historical references. The

Jewish people are descended from Abraham. But Abraham had many other descendants. He had at least two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. The descendants of Ishmael were not a part of Israel. Isaac had two son, Jacob and Esau. Jacob was renamed Israel but his brother's descendants were not a part of that people. So just as these other physical relatives did not make it in, not everyone who was physically descended from Jacob made it in.

Instead, Paul points to the promise. The story, of course, is the story of Sarah who became pregnant when she was 90 years old. That was a miracle. And a year before it happened, God told Abraham that in one year he would come back and Sarah would have a son. Sarah herself didn't believe it. But God made the promise and he kept it. And Paul says, **"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."** To be a part of the true Israel you have to be a part of the promise.

How does one become part of the promise? By believing in it. Even in the Old Testament, you could become a part of Israel by accepting God's promises. Several of Jesus' physical ancestors were women from different countries. But they believed the promise of the coming Savior. So today, God's promises to Israel still stand. God promised his people forgiveness and eternal life with him. That promise will come true for all the true Israel of God. Not the physical nation but all the people who trust in Jesus.

My friends, you are Israelites. You are a part of the people of God. On the day the Holy Spirit gave you faith, he changed your citizenship. He made you a part of the true, spiritual Israel. And you did not deserve that, any more than I did. It was an act of pure grace. We were foreigners, strangers, poverty stricken nobodies. We had no right to any of God's love. But he chose to make us his. In the past, it might have been easier to see how big a deal this was. Most peoples were ethnically united and they viewed all other peoples with hostility and suspicion. So God making enemies into friends was striking. We Americans perhaps don't see it as clearly because we come from so many different places and peoples. Our great-grandparents spoke so many different languages that the idea of making one people out of many strangers may not strike us all that much. But stop and think about our attitudes toward the border and toward illegal aliens. From God's perspective, that's what we were. The only right thing would've been to deport us back to hell. But in love, God made us citizens. He gave us full rights as his people. He did that through Jesus. His life, his death, his resurrection make us God's people. He did that through the Holy Spirit coming to us in that good news and giving us faith. God has brought us in.

Rejoice in that gift of God's grace! Rejoice because you are the true Israel of God! And what then should our attitude be toward the Jewish people today? See them for what they are: the source of our salvation. We have been adopted into their spiritual family. See them as the people of the promise. And pray that many of them would hear that good news and return to their spiritual heritage. Sadly, so many of them have left it behind. Without faith in Christ, they are not a part of the true Israel. Not all those who are descended from Israel are Israel. But God can bring them back. Pray that he would. Pray that he would bring many more gentiles, too, into his spiritual people. And work to make that happen here at Peace. Amen.