

***Romans 11, Pt. 2***

Do you have hope for the future? Hope may be defined as the thread that connects our present circumstances with some desired future state of affairs. We can see hope at work in the lives of young adults. Young adults who have hope believe there's a connection between their schoolwork, hobbies, and preparation with positive outcomes later in life. Young adults without hope, however, shrug their shoulders and say, "What's the point? Things always go wrong." People without hope (or with very thin threads of hope) give up on working hard and moving forward. They give in to the fatalistic urge that says "Whatever will be will be." There is much in our lives which attempts to extinguish hope. Maybe someone has been hurt by others many times. With each fresh disappointment, the thread of hope thins out. Hope makes a difference for churches, as well. Churches with hope can see a future. Churches without hope can't. Sometimes churches without hope become rather grim places. Others without hope are superficially cheerful, escaping into sentimentality and the "warm fuzzies." In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Morgan Freeman's character Red says, "Hope is a good thing; maybe the best of things." Paul would disagree with this statement - he says the greatest thing between faith, hope, and love is love - but nonetheless we understand Red's point. Having the thread of hope makes a difference.

When Paul thought about the Jewish people who had not believed in Jesus, he was deeply grieved. Yet - and this is a crucial point - he never abandoned hope. As we saw last week, he knew that both Jews and Gentiles were being converted to the Christian faith. People were being born again. He also expected that God would continue to work in the future. Gentile people would continue to be converted, and Jewish people would continue to find their Messianic hopes fulfilled in Jesus. It is this future-oriented aspect of the text which calls for our attention today. Let's review some key verses from the passage which speak of the future conversion of Jewish people to Christian faith.

The first crucial reference occurs in v. 12 - “Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean.” Paul is observing that the hardening of certain parts of Israel has opened the door for ministry to Gentiles. Parts of Israel, parts which lacked true faith, had stumbled and been defeated. God can bring good things out of bad things, and so the rejection of some has led to salvation for others. But Paul has hope that every one of God’s people will be enriched by a future event that he refers to as the “full inclusion” of Israel. What does this mean? It means that God has not given up on his people of Israel and he still plans to bring Jewish people into the kingdom. God, who is sovereign and wise, knows when he will reach the moment of full inclusion. Such information, of course, is beyond our knowledge. We live by faith and hope, not by sight. We work, believing that God knows when the “full inclusion” is complete.

Paul writes something similar in v. 15: “For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!” Some Jewish people had rejected Christ, thereby becoming branches removed from the olive tree. In this rejection, the gospel was propelled to the nations of the world. But then Paul holds out the hope that there will be a future acceptance. Jewish people who had rejected Christ would believe in Christ, thereby becoming natural branches re-grafted into the tree. What will be the result of this acceptance? It will be like life from the dead. From the human perspective it could not have happened, but God is not cowed by death and human unbelief. He accomplishes his purposes.

Then, in v. 23, Paul is again clear: “And even they - if they do not continue in their unbelief - will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.” The emphasis here is on God’s ability to do the re-grafting. Some of Israel had rejected Israel, and they were cut off from the vine. But God has the ability to change hearts and minds. God can receive the repentant and connect Jewish believers again to the true vine, which as we noted last week, is Jesus.

The most clear statement of Paul’s hope comes in v. 26 - “All Israel will be saved.” Let us take a moment and understand Paul’s argument. Some of Israel has been hardened through unbelief. For the time, as Paul is writing, it seems as if God’s concern has mostly moved to the salvation of the nations. Jewish

people are still converting, of course - Paul is proof of this reality. But nonetheless, Paul's mission is increasingly aimed at preaching the gospel to people in far flung locales, at the edges of the empire. But is God done with Israel? Absolutely not! Paul looks forward to a future time, after what he calls the "full number" of the Gentiles have been grafted in, when God will deal with all the elect members of Israel in a powerful manner. The result: all who are truly of Israel (which means all who have living faith) will be saved. None will be lost. Because of this statement, many Reformed Christians through the years have held out hope that, during the time before the end, there will be a great revival among Jewish people. Many people of Jewish identity will come to find their messianic expectations met in Christ. Because of such a hope, two things must happen in the present. First, the gospel must continue to be preached to Jewish people. Second, Christians should work together with others who value Israel to help secure the health and well-being of the Jewish people. Hence, there is a need for Christians to work against anti-Semitism both at home and abroad.

It is crucial at this juncture to note that this future salvation is only to be accomplished because of God's mercy in Christ. God has imprisoned all in disobedience - both Jew and Gentile - so that he might have mercy on all - both Jew and Gentile. As we have repeatedly observed in this letter, God's way of mercy comes through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, dying for the justification of the unrighteousness. This gift is received by the kind of living faith exhibited in the life of Abraham, the kind of living faith that was taught by Moses in Deuteronomy. Salvation does not come by playing games with the law but through trust in God and his promises. As Paul reflects on God's sovereignty and mercy, he can't help but sing out God's praise in the concluding four verses of the chapter - "O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

When we began this section of the letter at the first verse of chapter nine, Paul was heartbroken over those members of his people who had not believed in Jesus. But we conclude this section with the last verse of chapter eleven, and we find that Paul is full of hope.

There is a great power in reflecting on this movement in Paul's thought. There are things which continue to break your heart. Loved ones do not believe in Jesus as savior. Our churches lack something of the vitality and fullness of

days gone by. Our culture is fraught with immorality and nonsense. But never let matters rest with the heartbreak. You can live with hope. Why? Because God is the same God whom Paul served. He is the same God who sent his only Son so that we might have eternal life. God's character remains unchanged. His purposes will be accomplished. We like Paul can come to a place of hope.

And from that place of hope, we can begin to act. We can talk to other people about our faith. We can pray for them. We can invite them to worship or some other program. As of last Thursday, I have counted 44 conversations towards our goal of 1000 Spiritual Conversations. Each one of those 44 conversations represents a moment in which someone in this congregation acted not in fear but with faith. When we partner with Love INC to bring transformation to the broken, we are acting in hope. When we invest financially in EPC church plants, we are living from a place of hope. When we beautify our building, we are proclaiming that God is not through with us for we are a people of hope.

Hope is that thread that connects our present state of affairs with a desired future state of affairs. Hope is something that can be damaged and lost. But hope is something that God also builds into his people. In a few moments, I will invite you to taste and see hope, to come to the table and eat with Jesus at his invitation. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is one of the primary ways that God has left to his people for the building up of hope and endurance in a world that is irksome and difficult. The hope of the table is that we will one day eat and drink with the Lord in the new heavens and new earth. Let us look forward to and work for that day.