

PAUL'S SORROW ABOUT ISRAEL

There are various matters in the chapter read (Rom. 9) which may profitably engage our contemplations this morning. First we have Paul telling us that he had "*great heaviness and continual sorrow in his heart.*" The cause of this sorrow may afford us comfort in a certain way, for we are in some points in a similar relation. The cause of his sorrow was the estrangement from Christ of his "*kinsmen according to the flesh, Israelites, to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises.*" To see the full cause of this sorrow, we must recognise the fulness of its extent. The estrangement of Israel from Christ was a national estrangement. It comprehended the vast mass of the nation. There were many thousands of Jews who believed, but these were but a handful among the others. The picture before the mind of Paul was the picture of God's nation as a whole in a state of non-submission to God's will concerning them; yea, a state of virulent opposition to what He required of them, and that too in the guise of a national zeal for what God had revealed by Moses—a guise that in many cases corresponded with their sincere sentiments, as Paul testifies,

"I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge"
(Rom. 10:2).

He could remember his own situation in a similar predicament, which enabled him the more easily to recognise their case and the more deeply to sorrow for it. As he said to the crowd whom he was permitted to address on the occasion of his arrest in Jerusalem,

"I was zealous towards God, as ye all are this day: and I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women" (Acts 22:3-4).

Here was Paul's sorrow, that the one nation upon earth which was divine—divine in its origin, in its history, in its relations, in its institutions, should be out of harmony with its own glorious privileges; should be blind to its own glorious Scriptures; should have rejected its own glorious Messiah, and spurned its own glorious hope, as taught by his apostles. Nothing was to be expected from classical Greek, or pagan Roman, or the untutored barbarian races: but Israel—God's witnesses in the earth to whom pertained the promises and the covenants, and who professed subjection to the writings of Moses and the prophets! Paul deeply sorrowed and had continual heaviness of heart, that while they made their boast of God and Moses, they knew not the scriptures of Moses, which required them to hearken to the promised prophet like unto Moses, who had been raised up in their midst by the Lord who delivered them from the land of Egypt.

While we look at burdened and groaning Paul in this relation, we are reminded that it is only a repetition of the experience of all the prophets. They were much alone in their day and generation and from the same cause, that the bulk of God's own nation were out of harmony with the foundation upon which they were professedly founded. It is easy to see how we may apply their cases to our own comfort. Our position is somewhat similar. We live in the midst of a community professedly subject to Christ, boasting of his name, and doing many great things in connection with their profession, and yet as a matter of fact, they are unbelieving of the great truth of which Jesus was the embodiment, and disobedient to nearly all the commandments he has delivered. We find this out by the test we are commanded to apply—the test of the law and the testimony applied to their works and principles—a process of test which Jesus commended in the Ephesians (Rev. 2:2). The discovery that this is the state of things is very grievous. It is wholesome as regards ourselves, but sorrow-causing—a discovery causing isolation, cutting us off from the surrounding streams of sympathy, and subjecting us to a soul-parching experience and imparting "*great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart.*" What can we do? We can only accept our mournful lot in hope of the better day, when whole nations will seek to learn Yahweh's ways and to walk in His paths. It would be the act of insanity to do otherwise. We must not let the situation have the effect of making us join the universal departure from God. It is our wisdom to act in the way enjoined on the prophets and apostles:

“Let them return unto thee, but return not thou unto them.”

Jeremiah declares his action to have been in harmony with this advice:

“I sat not in the assembly of the mockers, nor rejoiced: I sat alone, because of thy hand.”

Again,

“For thy sake I have suffered rebuke. Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart.”

Paul exemplified the same course of action, and recommended the brethren to adopt the same, even towards men professing to be brethren, who opposed the truth, or set at naught the commandments.

It is a dreary position, but let us not faint. It is part of the situation as appointed. All the promises, as you know, are for those who mourn, who are poor, who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and who are spoken evil of because of their zeal for what is right before God. We all desire to participate in the consolation of the day of the manifestation of the sons of God. Consequently we must be prepared to accept the dark side for the present. All the sons of God have had to do it in their day and generation. It is true of them all, that *“through much tribulation they enter into the kingdom of God.”* It is grievous while it lasts, but does not last long at the longest. Our days are few if evil, and the days of the recompense are endless and fraught with goodness such as it hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive.

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”

Reverting to the unhappy state of things in Israel Paul anticipates and answers a criticism that he does not formulate, but which is manifestly present to his mind and to which the position he takes up is naturally open. This is a very frequent thing in Paul's letters, where an objection, not expressed, yet visible between the lines, is dealt with where it would naturally arise. The objection in the present case relates to the apparent complete failure confessed, in God's dealings with Israel. It is as if the objector said, “How is it that the word of God has had so little effect that the very nation whom He has made the special subject of treatment is in nearly complete rebellion against Him? There must be something wrong.” Paul in effect replies, “Not so: do not judge so harshly; God's purpose has not failed at all, although I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart.” His words are,

“Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called.”

Here is something at first sight very obscure. We do not at first see in what way it is an answer to the objection with which Paul is dealing. But let us ponder it a little, and we shall see its completeness as an answer shine out with brightness. The first difficulty is in the statement,

“They are not all Israel that are of Israel.”

At first sight it would seem as if to be Israel and *“of Israel”* were the same thing: for as we look at Israel in the earth, it seems natural to ask, Who are Israel if not those who appertain to Israel? The solution is in the use of the term Israel. There are two ways of using this term; first, in the sense in which it originated in the history of Jacob at the very beginning, and secondly, in the sense of designating the descendants of Jacob as a race in the earth. Now, it is obviously more appropriate every way to use the term with the meaning in which it originated, for this defines its exact relations. Its meaning is *“a prince with God.”* It was because of this meaning that it was bestowed on Jacob,

who prevailed by his spiritual importunity on the occasion of a certain angel appearing to him. With this meaning it has come to embrace the whole family of God, retrospectively and prospectively. Now, why were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets, esteemed as “princes with God”? Was it because of their extraction or because of their character? The latter unquestionably. God made choice of them on this ground.

“I know him (Abraham), that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him”

(Gen. 18:19).

God chose their descendants as a nation, on the basis of the covenant of circumcision (17:10-14); and as a nation they will remain His as unalterably as the establishment of the ordinances of heaven and earth (Jer. 31:36-37). But a man may belong to the nation and pass away as an individual, like Achan, or Judas, or the whole generation whose carcasses fell in the wilderness because of their insubordination. He may be born of Israel and thus be of Israel and yet not be Israel in the original significance of the term. It is not sufficient for individual participation in the glorious aion of perfection in reserve for Israel, that a man belong to the nation of Israel. He must be Israel as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were Israel—a prince with God because of faith and obedience. Now this was the case with only a small minority in Israel: hence it came to pass that they were not all Israel that were of Israel. It did not follow because they were the seed of Abraham according to the flesh that therefore they were all “*children*.” To be children in the complete sense, they required to resemble Abraham in his faith and in the docility of his obedience to God. So Jesus had told them, before Paul by the Spirit wrote similar words:

“I know that ye are Abraham’s seed: but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you . . . If ye were Abraham’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham”
(John 8:37-39).

Paul’s meaning is therefore perfectly clear. The word of God had not been without effect. It had accomplished its work with Israel in all generations: and if it did not leaven the whole body of the nation, it was because “*they were not all Israel that were of Israel*.” They were not of the right stamp; they were not all of a good and honest heart (Matt. 13:23; Luke 8:15). Moses recognised this even before they entered the land (Deut. 31:29; 32:5). If it be asked why they were not all of the good and honest heart, that opens out a question which Paul deals with further on in the same chapter.

Meanwhile, let us deal with the principle before us as it bears upon ourselves; for we handle these matters in vain if we do not extract from them something of an improving and purifying effect. You may say, How can it be made to bear upon us, seeing we are not Israel after the flesh? The answer is, though we are not of Israel after the flesh, we are Israel by adoption, as Paul teaches, styling the adopted in Christ “*the Israel of God*” (Gal. 6:16), and plainly teaching that such are no longer strangers but fellow-citizens in the commonwealth of Israel (Eph. 2:19). Now, is our adoption irrevocable? Does it follow that we shall always be Israel because we have been adopted? On this point Paul is very explicit. Using the figure of the olive tree to represent the commonwealth of Israel and its natural branches, as the Jews, he says,

“Because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not high-minded, but fear: for if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee . . . Continue in his goodness; otherwise thou shalt also be cut off”
(Rom. 11:20-22).

From this it is evident that we stand related to precisely the same principles of standing as those which governed God's dealings with Israel after the flesh. What follows? That it may be true of us as of them:

"They are not all Israel that are of Israel."

You may say why put such an idea forward? Merely because of the great importance of its recognition. Some people are apt to imagine that it is all right with them because they have been baptised upon a profession of the truth—that because they are associated with the brethren, their salvation is sure; that because they assemble with the brethren and are of the brethren and so recognised, therefore they are brethren. It is well to see that they are not all Israel that are of Israel; that they are not all brethren that are of the brethren: and that if a man have not a loving and a fearing heart towards Him, and a zealous affection for the things of the Spirit, and a readiness for prompt obedience of the commandments, his standing among the brethren will weigh nothing in his favour when the day comes for the selection and manifestation of the princes of God in all the earth. The choice will only fall on "*Israelites indeed*": mere Israelites can have no useful place in the house of God, which is the house of His glory and the house of holiness.

Paul's quotation of what was said concerning Isaac is a similar example of a truth having two applications easily made to appear inconsistent one with another. He proves his assertion that the mere seed of Abraham after the flesh are not necessarily his children, by the words addressed to Abraham when he was distressed about sending Ishmael away:

"In Isaac shall thy seed be called."

This might be thought a strange way of disproving the standing of those who were actually descendents of Isaac. It would seem to have the opposite effect, for if in Isaac, as contrasted with Ishmael, the seed were to be called, surely the Jews had a right in claiming sonship as the descendants of Isaac. Go deeper, however, and we find Paul's argument right. Why in Isaac and not in Ishmael were Abraham's seed to be called? For a reason which when applied to the subject of Paul's contention, established his argument that all were not Israel who were of Israel. This reason as defined by Paul is in Rom. 9:8, as follows:

"They who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed."

Ishmael as the mere offspring of the mechanical law of generation was not a suitable foundation for a work of God in the earth which was to be His own direct work and for His own glory, exclusive of all ground for human complacency. The foundation of this work was to be a son, which had to be given outside the power of nature. Such a son was Isaac. Concerning his maternity, we read:

*"Through faith also Sarah herself **received strength** to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child **when she was past age**, because she judged him faithful who had promised. Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude."*

This fact in Abraham's history was a distinct enunciation of the principle that Paul was contending for. Ishmael was the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, yet he was excluded from the covenant, because no more than this. Isaac was a child of Yahweh's own promise and production, and was of Abraham's character in addition to Abraham's blood. Surely nothing could be more logical than Paul's deduction from this, that they who are the children of the flesh are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed. If it be contended that this excludes the Jews from divine relation altogether the answer is No; God has chosen them as a nation. This is the natural root out of which the spiritual flower is grown: first the natural, afterwards the spiritual. It was needful

there should be a nation as the foundation. This nation was chosen *“in Isaac,”* that is, his descendants in Jacob were chosen nationally on the basis of flesh extraction, but a step higher in the same process was necessary to give an individual place with Isaac in the perfect state contemplated in the promises in their ultimate fulfilment. Faith and obedience were needful in the individual members of Isaac’s race in order to their being *“counted for the seed”* in its final form. If it be asked, what, then, about the Gentiles? the answer is that we get by adoption what the Jews get by birth, and we are no more exempt than they from the necessity of building on the foundation of our adoption that spiritual structure of faith and obedience which they were required to add to their natural extraction from the holders of the promises. Such, whether Jews or Gentiles, are the children of promise as Isaac was—the children contemplated in the promises to the fathers, and the children produced by God’s own operation among men: for where would they have been apart from the fact stated by James,

“Of his own will begat he us by the word of truth”?

He has placed the truth in the world with this mission. It is his power unto salvation to everyone believing. Apart from it, all is barbarism and death, albeit the barbarism may be very elegant, and death decked out in a beautiful wreathing of false immortelles.

Taken from: - “Seasons of Comfort” Vol. 1 By Bro. Robert Roberts