

THE TRIUMPH OF GOD IS HIS ETERNAL PURPOSE

Matthew 23:33-39 & Romans 11:33-36

INTRODUCTION

I'm going to do something different this morning from what I usually do. Normally, I take a specific passage of Scripture and seek to work through it to understand what God is saying to us through it. However, as I was doing my initial preparation for preaching through these last chapters of Matthew's gospel, especially the end of chapter 23 and all of 24, it seemed to me that there is large question that this passage raises for us. At the end of chapter 23 Jesus says that the Jewish nation is going to be destroyed for their rejection of him as the Messiah. The point of vv. 33-39 is that God has withheld his anger against the unbelief of Israel for many centuries but that now he is through being patient. He says that all of his just anger against the rebellion of Israel is going to be poured out on the generation of Israelites who witnessed Jesus' life and participated in his death.

This is not the first time God has threatened judgment upon Israel. Beginning with Moses, the first of Israel's prophets, God has many times threatened to destroy Israel and has actually carried out his threats on several occasions. However, every threat prior to this one has included a statement of salvation as well. In essence God has said, I am going to destroy you now because of your rebellion but I will not destroy you totally. You are my people and I will restore you. We heard it in the passage that Erick just read from Ezekiel. However, Jesus' words here, at the end of 23 and throughout 24 point to a more permanent rejection of Israel. There does not appear to be any promise of restoration. Therefore, the destruction of Israel as a nation calls into question the hundreds of promises God made to the descendants of Abraham. Consider just these few:

- Genesis 12: 2-3: God said to Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."
- Genesis 13: 14-16: God again says to Abraham: "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted."
- Deuteronomy 7:6: About 500 years later, Moses says to the more than 2 million Israelites gathered on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession."
- Deuteronomy 33: 27-29: Again Moses says, "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. He will drive out your enemy before you, saying, 'Destroy him!' So Israel will live in safety alone; Jacob's spring is secure in a land of grain and new wine, where the heavens drop dew. Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord?"
- Isaiah 41: 8-10, God says through Isaiah, "But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from it is farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

In light of the hundreds of promises God made to Israel to be their God forever, it is an astonishing thing that Israel's Messiah, Jesus, says that they will cease to be a nation and cease to be God's people. Their city, temple and nation will be destroyed and they will not see their Messiah again until he comes at the end of the ages to destroy his enemies and save his people. What are we to make of this judgment in light of the myriad promises given during the long centuries of Israel's existence? How are we to read the OT? How are we, as believers in Jesus, to relate to Israel and to Israel's book, our OT?

As I thought about that question and thought about spending a sermon giving an answer to it, I became somewhat discouraged and anxious. The cause of my consternation was twofold. First, this is a huge question and it appeared an overwhelming task to give an adequate answer in one sermon. Second, it struck me that hardly anyone here has any real interest in the question. I suppose some might be curious, but by and large, I doubt that many here would view the question of God's relationship to Israel as among the really pressing issues in your life. This caused me to ask another question. Why should you and I care about God's relationship to the nation Israel? When I asked this question, I immediately thought of Romans 9-11. In these three chapters, the apostle Paul, who was the chief spokesperson for the Christian church in the first 40 years of its existence, wrestled with this very question. What difference did understanding God's relationship to Israel make in Paul's life? What difference did he think it should make in our lives?

Turn with me to Romans 11:33. I think that Paul gives at least two effects that knowing about God's relationship to Israel ought to have in our lives. What I am going to do for the bulk of our time together this morning is to examine the two reasons why you and I should care about God's relationship to Israel as recorded in the OT. I am going to do this by considering portions of Romans 9-12. In doing so we will also see part of the answer to my original question: What is the nature of God's relationship to Israel now and in the future? However, most of what we are going to be discovering is why you and I should seek to grow in our knowledge of what God has revealed about himself and his world in the Bible.

MAIN POINT

You ought to grow in your knowledge of the history of God's saving work as recorded in the Scriptures so that...

I. You can be full of joy in God (Romans 11: 33-36)

The first thing I want you to notice about vv. 33-36 are punctuation marks. Do you notice in our English translations that there are several exclamation points in these verses? While the original Greek does not contain exclamation points because Greek doesn't possess them, yet the placement of these points are an accurate expression of the sentiment of these verses. Paul is, at this point in his letter, making an exclamation. Let me ask you a question, when do exclaim? You and I raise our voices and cry out when we are impressed with or delighted in something or when we are disappointed or angry about something. On Thanksgiving Day, I was sitting in our dining room after we ate with most of my brothers and sisters and their spouses, visiting. Around the corner in the family room many of our children were watching the second half of the Packer game. We regularly heard exclamations coming from the other room and were able to keep track of the progress of the game by means of these exclamations. When we heard joyful exclamations we knew the Packers had done something well and when we heard angry exclamations we knew they were doing poorly.

I'll never forget coming home from work a number of years ago and being greeted by Jane with the words, "You're not going to believe what I found today." She then showed me three old books, which she had purchased from a used bookstore that day for about \$20. She had been looking for these books for several years and knew that they were being sold for well over \$100 every other place she had found them. She exclaimed, "Can you believe I got them for \$20!?" Last Monday, my son Jordan, my youngest brother, Kyle and I spent half the day hunting deer in 8 inches of fresh snow with the sun shining in some of the prettiest country God made. On several occasions, as we would stand together looking at the gorgeous setting, one or the other of us would exclaim, "Isn't this beautiful!"

The apostle Paul, at the end of eleven chapters of describing the saving work of God, through his Son, Jesus Christ, cannot contain himself any longer and he exclaims in joy and wonder, "O the depth of the riches and of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and unsearchable are his ways!" As a result of what he has been writing about Paul has become enraptured with the beauty of God and his salvation. He cannot help but exclaim his delight in God. His heart is full of joy and so his lips are full of praise. I want us to go back into the first eleven chapters of Romans and simply observe some of the facts or

doctrines he was writing about. Then I want us to observe what these facts enabled him to see about God that filled him with so much pleasure that he had to cry out.

Let's look at just two passages to get a sense of what so impressed Paul. Look with me at the end of Romans 8 and the beginning of Romans 9. There is quite a contrast between these two chapters. Romans 8: 28-39 is another exclamation of delight in many ways. Romans 8:28 is that great promise that God is working out every detail of every Christian's life to produce eternal joy. In vv. 29-30 he summarizes that great salvation of God in his predestining, calling, justifying and glorifying his elect people. In v. 31 Paul asks, "what shall we say in response to this? If God is for us who can be against us?" In v. 35 he asks, "Who can separate us from the love of Christ?" These final verses of chapter 8 are full of affirmation and delight in the security of the Christian. However, notice how chapter 9 begins. "I speak the truth in Christ. I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit. I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." What could cause Paul to go from the ecstasy of 8:28-39 to stating he has unceasing anguish in his heart?

He tells us, "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, the people of my own race, the nation of Israel." The anguish of Paul is over the spiritual condition of his nation, the nation of Israel. His sorrow is so profound and his passion for them to be saved is so great that if it were possible that by his going to hell, his people would be saved, he would do it. Is this not the same sentiment that Jesus expresses back in Matthew 23? He wants to gather the people of Israel together, like a hen gathering her chicks, but they don't want to be gathered. This is a distressing reality that the people whom God chose out of all the nations of the world to be his people have rejected his promises and turned away from God's savior and so are going to be eternally lost. Paul goes on in Romans 9 to list all the advantages God gave to them. God adopted them as his sons, he revealed his glory to them on Mt. Sinai, in the wilderness by cloud and fire every day for forty years, at the dedication of the tabernacle and then the temple and on numerous other occasions. He entered into a variety of covenants with them, beginning with Abraham. He gave them the law and the temple worship and the myriads of promises. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to whom God appeared personally and through whom God brought the nation into existence are their forbears. The best and highest privilege God gave to this people is that Jesus Christ, who is God himself become man, has his human ancestry traced through the people of Israel. The greatest blessing God bestowed upon the nation Israel is that Jesus is Jewish. These are overwhelming privileges and yet they have repeatedly turned away and have now been forsaken by God. Paul grieves over them and over the ways in which they have profaned the name of God.

Now notice what he says in v. 6. Here is where he comes to our first question. "It is not as though God's word has failed." Paul is directly addressing the problem that Jesus presents us with in Matthew 23. How can it be that God should reject this nation to whom he has made promises for these many centuries? Is God a liar? Paul begins to answer that question by saying, "...for not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." What Paul is saying is that the people of God, the people who are the recipients of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not the same people as all those who are biologically descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Israel as the true people of God is not the same as Israel, all those biologically and religiously related to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He then proves from the OT that this has always been the case. In vv. 7-9 he notes that while Abraham had Ishmael by Hagar and another 6 sons by Keturah, his second wife, only Isaac received the promise, only Isaac was born by the power of God's promise. As he says in v. 8, it is not the natural, biological children of Abraham who are the children of God but those who are born by the promise of God. Then he uses Isaac's twin sons as a second example. He points out that prior to their birth, before they had done anything good or bad, God chose Jacob and rejected Esau. He did this so that his purpose in election would stand. That purpose is: salvation is entirely a work of God's grace, not man's effort. The main point is that true, spiritual Israel has never been the same as all those people biologically descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The true people of God have been those chosen by God, sovereignly, freely, graciously without any consideration given to who they are or what they have done.

In Romans 11: 1-8 he makes the same point. He asks, "Did God reject his people?" Paul says no he didn't because I'm an Israelite. God didn't reject all his people because many of those who believe in Jesus are Jewish. He then points to the time of Elijah the prophet. Elijah complains to God that he is the only faithful, believing Israelite left. However, God tells him that he has "reserved for himself, 7000 other men who have not bowed the knee" to the false god, Baal. Notice Paul's conclusion, "So too at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace then it is no longer by works, if it were than grace would no longer be grace." In other words, the people of God have always been those whom God has chosen by his grace and never has been all those who are biologically descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or those who obey some external law. Paul says far more than this in these chapters but it is in reflecting on the progress of God's saving his people through the centuries that brings Paul to his exclamation of delight.

As Paul reflects upon and writes about God's work of saving his people through the centuries and his securing that salvation in and through Jesus Christ, he cannot contain his joy and he makes this exclamation. Let's see what it is he sees in God by his saving works that causes him to rejoice with such joy. What he notes first of all is that God's riches, wisdom and knowledge are so deep that no human can ever fully comprehend what God knows and how God works. He isn't saying that we can know nothing of God and his ways because that is what he has been describing. What Paul sees so clearly based upon the glimmers we have been given in the gospel is that there is no "getting to the bottom" of God's wealth for his people, his wisdom in saving his people and his knowledge of all things.

Paul is like a person who is going snorkeling on one of the great reefs in our coastal waters. You go out on a boat onto the broad expanse of the ocean, getting out of sight of land. It's breathtaking in its beauty. Then you put on your flippers, mask and snorkel and slip over the side of the boat and as you put your face in the water you are stunned by the brilliant color of all the fish and aquatic plants. You take a deep breath and go 20-30 feet beneath the surface and swim among this dazzling display. But you can't stay under very long and you can't go very deep. You can tell from what you're able to see that there are unending wonders and delights that you will never fully explore by snorkeling because you cannot stay under long enough to get the full picture. So it is with Paul. As he sees the marvels of God's salvation he is in awe and knows that there is an unfathomable and unsearchable reality to God's nature and works. What he has seen is but the fringes of the glory of God in the salvation of sinners.

He then meditates upon the vast difference that exists between us, creatures made in the image of God and God himself. No one ever told God anything he didn't know already. No one ever gave him a piece of advice that he needed or explained a fact that he didn't know previously. No one has ever known what God knows without God revealing it to him. All true knowledge comes only by divine revelation. In short there is nothing and no one prior to God. He is the beginning and end of all things. Then, in verse 35, Paul is amazed at the fact that no human ever did anything that met a need in God or obligated God to do anything for them. In other words, Paul is overcome with the greatness of God and with the fact that this great God who needs nothing and no one and who has never been put in the debt of any creature has freely chosen to save some sinners. It would be perfectly just for God to never pay any attention to any human being and yet God has chosen to save some by grace. All things in creation and in redemption come from God, come through God and come to God. He alone gets all the glory, all the credit for everything but we who trust in Christ, as his chosen people, get all the delight. Don't miss this. As Paul meditates upon the way in which God has saved his people through the centuries he is overcome with a sense of God's greatness that causes him to break forth in exclamations of praise. He is full of joy and wonder at the supremacy of God in all things and so he declares that supremacy.

Let me show you how absolutely practical this is. In Acts 16, the apostle is in the Roman colony of Philippi in Macedonia. He is preaching the gospel. A slave girl, who has an evil spirit and who earns money for her masters by fortune telling begins to follow Paul around yelling out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She continued to do this day after day. Whenever Paul would try to speak she would be there interrupting him. She did not give he and his companions a moment's silence. Finally, he cast the spirit out of her. This made her masters angry and they seized them, dragged them before

the local court and falsely accused them. Then they and the crowd that was present beat and flogged him and the court had him thrown into prison. So here is Paul, sitting in a dank, dark, smelly prison, unjustly charged, with his back torn open from the flogging, his cheeks swollen from the beatings, unable to freely preach the gospel, surrounded by criminals, and what is he doing? He is singing hymns of praise to God. In other words, he is exclaiming in song his joy in God.

Note what Paul is not doing. He is not hopeless and in despair. He is not asking God how he could allow such horrible treatment to happen when he was out there trying to do God's will. If the point of life is getting to freely preach the gospel then there is no reason for joy. If the point of life is staying out of prison, there is no hope for Paul. If the point of life is to not get beat up and to be able to freely associate with your friends, then Paul's life is over. However, if the point of life is to be taken up with the amazing glory of Jesus Christ as he saves unworthy sinners, then there is always great cause for joy and hope. Paul's joy does not come from having God give him a comfortable life here but from the knowledge of God. He, the chief of all sinners, knows God and is known by God and this is the source of his joy. Listen to me. You will never feel the way Paul feels until you know what Paul knows. You want to have joy? Spend time prayerfully meditating upon the work of God in saving sinners. Cry out to God for the work of the Holy Spirit to enable you to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ as he is revealed in this book. Listen, simply knowing doctrine does not guarantee you will love Christ as Paul does but you cannot love Christ without knowing the truth about him.

If you have fixed in your mind and heart the brilliance of God's saving grace and are daily seeking to ponder his power in saving his people as revealed on the pages of this book, then when you lose all the pleasures of this life you can yet remain full of hope and joy. When you are listening to sermons or reading your Bible or learning the catechism or in a Bible Study you ought always to be praying that God would enable you to be overcome with awe at his great glory in the salvation of his people that you might be full of this joy that produces exclamations of delight.

You ought to grow in your knowledge of the history of God's saving work as recorded in the Scriptures so that...

- *You can be full of joy in God*
- *And so that...*

II. You can live like a Christian in this messed up world (Romans 12)

Chapter 12 is full of commands about how we are to live as Christians. In fact, all of chapters 12, 13, 14 and the first 7 verses of 15 are commands about how to live. I want you to notice verse 1 of chapter 12. It begins with "therefore." In other words, all of these commands are given as a result of all the glory explained in chapters 1-11. In light of this gracious work of God to save the elect by means of Christ's life, death and resurrection Paul exhorts us, as Christians to live a certain kind of life. It is, according to v. 1 a "dying life". We are to die to pursuing our life in the pleasures of this world and pursue our pleasure in the life offered to us in Christ. We are to do it because of the glory of God in saving his elect people.

In addition, Paul's exhortation in these chapters is in "view of God's mercy". In other words, the entire motive behind Christian living is a knowledge of and delight in the great saving work of God in and through Jesus Christ. Paul is not saying that we are to live the Christian life out of gratitude for what God has done for us. We are not to try to pay God back for his kindness. That would make v. 35 a lie. You can never pay God back and you should never try. It is arrogance to believe that you can do anything to repay God. You are to rejoice in and give thanks for what God has done for you but you are not to try to pay him back. God doesn't need you or your obedience. You are the one who needs God. When Paul says, "in view of (or "by") God's mercies", he means that we are to obey these commands counting on God's mercy, calling upon his mercy, living for more experiences of his mercy. We live by faith in the promises of God.

We are to present our bodies as living sacrifices because we believe that being loved by God is better than possessing the world. We want to be transformed in our thinking, not conformed to the pattern of this world because we believe it is happier to think like God than to think like Rush Limbaugh or Ralph Nader or Brittany Spears or your therapist or your best friend. We do not want to think more highly of ourselves than we ought because we love having sober judgment about ourselves. We want to hate what is evil and cling to what is good because it gives us more pleasure to do so. We want to honor other Christians above ourselves because nothing makes us happier than when others are honored and we are ignored. We never repay evil for evil and we take care of our enemies because we love doing so. We live by faith in the promises of God. We pursue what we love, pleasing Jesus and being like him.

The “therefore” and “in view of God’s mercy” tell us how it is that the Christian does the will of God. We obey these commands because it gives us pleasure to do so. If obedience to God is not a pleasure than we are not obeying by faith. Rather we are obeying by works or by duty. Most of us received a command this last Thursday that was a delight to obey. We were commanded to come sit at the table and eat. All of us, joyfully obeyed that command. While we were obeying the command to eat we didn’t groan about it, rather we praised our host and the quality of the foods of which we partook. We enjoyed fulfilling the command. This is how it is with every command of God. It is an invitation to come and feast upon his mercy. You will never know the joy of belonging to Christ without denying yourself honor in order to honor another Christian. You will never know the delight of being loved by God as long as you hold onto grudges and seek to repay others for the evil they do to you. When God commands you to be patient in affliction, he is inviting you to enter into the joy of his salvation. Grumbling about the trouble in your life or working to escape some affliction by your own means is like devouring a loaf of white bread with no butter on it and nothing to wash it down instead of coming to the Thanksgiving table. Refusing to accept other Christians as Jesus accepted you is to refuse the hospitality of your gracious host and to eat your Thanksgiving meal by yourself. I prefer a plate of cold beans eaten in an unheated room by myself to enjoying a turkey feast with my family. That is what we are saying when we refuse to obey the commands of God, for the commands of God are not burdensome to God’s people but an invitation to feast upon his mercy and to discover his love is better than life.

How do we become people who view God’s commands as invitations to a feast rather than being assigned to a dungeon? We “taste and see that the Lord is good.” We find a command of God and then we cry out to God for the grace to believe that obedience to the command will yield greater joy than disobedience. We ask God for faith. Then we obey the command. Then we give thanks to God for the faith he gave us to believe obedience was better than disobedience. We taste the mercy of God given to us in this act of obedience and so we ask for seconds. This is the Christian life.

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- *You can be full of joy in God*
- *You can live like a Christian in this messed up world*

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