

THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS: AN EXPANDED PARAPHRASE

II. THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE. Ch. 1: 16-11: 36

(Continued)

(e) The Divine Purpose in History (Ch. 9-11)

(i) The Problem of Israel's Unbelief (Ch. 9: 1-5)

THIS is my word of honour as a Christian man ; it is no lie ; for my conscience assures me within, together with the Holy Spirit, that I am speaking no more than the truth. I have great and unceasing anguish of heart ; indeed, I could pray that I myself were separated from Christ and put under His curse. But why? For the sake of my brothers, who are bound to me by the bonds of natural birth. They are Israelites. They are the people whom God has called to be His sons ; among them He tabernacled in glory ; to them He gave the covenants, the legislation, the divine worship, the promises. The patriarchs are theirs, for they are descended from them ; above all, so far as His human lineage is concerned, Christ Himself is theirs—blessed for ever be God over all ! Amen.

(ii) God's Sovereign Choice (Ch. 9: 6-29)

But although they have refused the gospel, this is not as if the Word of God had come to nought. For it is not all Israelites by natural descent who make up the true Israel ; nor, because they are all Abraham's descendants, are they all in the truest sense Abraham's children. No ; the Scripture says: "It is through Isaac that your descendants will be called by your name" (Gen. 21: 12). That is to say, it is not natural descent that makes people children of God ; it is the children born in accordance with the promise who are Abraham's true descendants. Now this is how the promise was worded: "In due course, reckoning from this hour, I will visit you and Sarah will have a son" (Gen. 18: 10). (And the son born in accordance with that promise was Isaac.)

Moreover, something to the same effect happened when Rebecca was with child by her husband, our forefather Isaac. Before her children were born, before they had done anything either good or bad—in order that God's purpose might be established in accordance with His sovereign choice, not on the ground of their deeds but by the will of Him who called one rather than

the other—she received the divine communication: “The elder will serve the younger” (Gen. 25: 23). And accordingly we have the declaration of God many generations later: “I chose Jacob; I passed over Esau” (Mal. 1: 2 f.).

What are we to say to all this? Does God countenance unrighteousness? Perish the thought! No; as God says to Moses, “I will deal mercifully with whom I will; I will show compassion to whom I will” (Ex. 33: 19). You see, then, it does not depend on human will or human effort; it depends on our merciful God.

You find the same principle in the story of Pharaoh. The Scripture records how God said to him: “It was for this that I raised you up, that I might display my power through you, and that my name might be proclaimed through all the earth” (Ex. 9: 16).

But, you will say to me, “If He ordains men’s ways by His own will, why does He still blame them for their ways? They conform to His will; they don’t oppose it.” But, my good sir, who are you to answer back to God? Shall a piece of earthenware say to the man who moulded it, “Why have you made me this way?” Has not the potter a perfect right to use the clay as he will—from one and the same lump to make one pot for honourable use, and another for dishonourable? Why should we find fault with God, then? If he wishes to display His wrath against sin and make known His power, why should He not bear very patiently with pots, so to speak, which are to be object-lessons of His wrath, fashioned to be destroyed? And why should He not plan to make known the abundance of His glory in the case of other “pots” which are to be object-lessons of His mercy, prepared in advance for a glorious purpose? And in fact such objects of His mercy are we, whom He has called from among Jews and Gentiles alike.

This is the principle shown in Hosea:

I will call my people those who were not my people,
I will call beloved one who was not beloved;
And where they were told, “You are not my people”,
There shall they be called sons of the living God.

(Hos. 2: 23; 1: 10.)

Again, Isaiah proclaims concerning Israel:

Though Israel’s sons be numerous as the sand of the sea,
A remnant only will survive;
For bringing His word to completion and cutting it short,
The Lord will take action on the earth.

(Is. 10: 22 f.)

Isaiah had already spoken to the same effect:

Had not the Lord of hosts left us some progeny,
We had become as Sodom,
We had been like Gomorrah.

(Is. 1: 9.)

(iii) Man’s Responsibility (Ch. 9: 30-10: 21)

What are we to say, then? The Gentiles, who did not pursue after righteousness, have attained it—but the righteousness they have attained is that righteous standing before God which comes by faith. Israel, pursuing a law which is characterized by righteousness, never succeeded in fulfilling that law. And why? Because they did not seek the righteousness which comes by faith but that which is founded on works. They have stumbled against the “stumbling-stone” of which the prophet speaks:

Behold I lay in Zion a stone to make men stumble,

A rock to trip them up;

But he who commits himself to it will not be put to shame.

(Is. 8: 14.)

My brothers, the desire of my heart and my entreaty to God on their behalf is for their salvation. I agree that they have zeal for God, but it is not based on right knowledge. The reason is that they do not know God’s way of righteousness, and endeavour to establish their own, so they have not submitted to God’s. Now, to every one who believes, Christ is the fulfilment of the law, leading them to true righteousness.

Of the righteousness which comes through the law Moses writes thus: “The man who does it will live by it” (Lev. 18: 5). But this is the voice of the righteousness which is attained by faith: “Don’t say to yourself, ‘Who will go up to heaven?’”—that is, to bring Christ down. “Don’t say, ‘Who will go down to the nethermost deep?’”—that is, to bring Him up from the abode of the dead. What does it say, then? This! “The message is close beside you, on your tongue, in your heart”—that is, the message of faith which we proclaim—for if you confess Jesus as Lord with your tongue, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, salvation will be yours. It is with the heart that men exercise the faith by which God accepts them as righteous; it is with the tongue that they make confession and so receive God’s salvation. For, as the scripture quoted above assures us, “he who commits himself to Christ will not be put to shame” (Is. 8: 14).

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile. The same Lord is Lord of them all, blessing with His abundant mercy all who call upon Him, for “every one who calls upon the Lord’s name will be saved” (Joel 2: 32).

How then are they to call upon Him if they have never believed in Him? And how are they to believe in Him if they have never heard of Him? And how are they to hear unless someone tells them? And how can anyone tell them without being sent? As the scripture puts it: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the joyful news of good things!" (Is. 52: 7).

Yet it is true that all have not paid heed to the good news. Isaiah has this too to say: "Lord, who has believed our message?" (Is. 53: 1). Faith, then, comes by response to the message, and the message comes by the commission of Christ.

But, I might say, perhaps they did not hear? O yes, they did. The psalmist's words about the stars are equally true of the gospel:

Their sound went out into all the earth,
Their words to the ends of the world. (Ps. 19: 4.)

Well, I might say, perhaps Israel did not understand? (They ought to have understood better than the Gentiles. But in fact the present situation was foreseen in ancient times, as the following scriptures show.) First, Moses says:

I will make you jealous by means of those who are no nation,
I will make you angry by means of a nation that does not understand. (Deut. 32: 21.)

And Isaiah goes to the very limit of daring and says:

I was found by those who did not seek me;
I was seen by those who did not ask for me. (Is. 65: 1.)

(He means, of course, the Gentiles.) But as for Israel, this is what he says: "All the day long I stretched out my hands to a people that disobeyed and contradicted me" (Is. 65: 2).

(iv) God's Purpose for Israel (Ch. 11: 1-24)

In view of all this, then, has God rejected His people Israel? Perish the thought! Why, consider: I myself am an Israelite, descended from Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. No: God has not rejected His people—His people whom He acknowledged as His own in ages past. Do you not know what the scripture says in the story of Elijah, when he accuses Israel in his prayer to God? "Lord", he protests, "they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I am left alone—and now they are after my life too!" (1 Kings 19: 10). How does God's response run? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to Baal's image" (1 Kings 19: 18). And as then, so also at the present time there is a "remnant", those whom God in His grace has reserved for Himself. But if He has done it in His grace, then it is not based on works, for in that case grace would cease to be grace.

What does all this mean, then? This, that Israel has not attained what she continues to seek after, but God's chosen remnant has attained it. The others have become insensitive, just as the scripture says:

God has given them a spirit of torpor,
Unseeing eyes and unhearing ears,
Even to the present day. (Is. 29: 10; Deut. 29: 4.)

David similarly says:

Let their table become a net and a snare,
A trap and a source of retribution to them;
Let their eyes be darkened that they cannot see,
And their backs continually bent. (Ps. 69: 22 f.)

Does their stumbling mean, then, that they have fallen to rise no more? No indeed! On the contrary, their falling out has become the means of salvation to the Gentiles, so that they themselves in turn may be stung into jealousy. But if their falling out turns out to be the enriching of the world, and their reverse the enriching of the Gentiles, how much more enrichment will their full restoration bring!

I am speaking here to you who are Gentiles. To the full degree of my apostleship to the Gentiles, I count my ministry glorious, in order that by it I may awaken jealousy in those who are flesh of my flesh, and so save some of them. For if their being set aside means the reconciliation of the world, what will their reacceptance mean? Why, it will be life from the dead, a veritable resurrection! If the firstfruits are holy, they sanctify the whole mass of dough; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

(Take this idea of the root and the branches.) Some of the branches, let us say, were broken off, and you, a wild olive, have been grafted in among them so as to share in the sap which comes up from the root of the cultivated olive. If that is so, don't boast as though you were better than the severed branches. If you do, you must be reminded that you don't support the root; it is the root that supports you. "Oh", you will say, "but branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in". Very true, and why were they broken off? Because of unbelief. And why do you remain grafted in? Because of faith. So don't have conceited ideas about yourself, but preserve a healthy sense of fear. If God did not spare the natural branches, He certainly will not spare you. Look then at God's kindness and severity—severity towards those who fell to the ground, but God's kindness to you, if you remain in His kindness; if you don't, you will also be cut off. On the other hand, if they no longer persist in their unbelief, they will be

grafted in again ; for God is able to graft them back. Of course He is ; for if you were cut off from what was by nature a wild olive and were grafted on to a cultivated olive—a proceeding clean contrary to nature—much more those branches which originally belonged to the cultivated olive will be grafted on to their own olive again.

(v) God's Purpose for Mankind (Ch. 11: 25-36)

I want you to understand this "mystery", my brothers, to keep you from being self-conceited: Israel has been affected by a partial insensitivity until the full complement of Gentiles is brought in ; by this means all Israel will enter into salvation, as the scripture says:

The Deliverer will come forth from Zion,

He will turn away impiety from Jacob ;

And this is the covenant they will receive from me,

When I take away their sins. (Is. 27: 9 ; Jer. 31: 33.)

In relation to the gospel, they are treated as enemies for your benefit but in relation to God's sovereign choice, they are the objects of His love because of their fathers. God does not revoke His free gifts or the call by which He makes His people His own. Just as you, who were once disobedient to God, have now found mercy through their unbelief, so their disobedience has become the occasion of your finding mercy, in order that they too may find mercy. For God's purpose in shutting up both Gentiles and Jews alike in a place where their disobedience must be brought to light was that He might show mercy to them all.

O the unfathomable abundance of God's wisdom and knowledge ! How unsearchable are His decrees ! How inscrutable His ways ! As the prophet says:

Who has understood the mind of the Lord ?

Or who has shared His counsel ?

Who has first given to Him,

That he should be repaid his gift ? (Is. 40: 13 f.)

For all things proceed from Him, exist through Him, and return to Him: to Him be the glory throughout all ages. Amen.

(To be continued)