

Advent is a season of preparation; during these four weeks we try to back off and take inventory in order more fully to be able to participate in the celebration of Christmas: the mystery in which the eternal God over all the universe has come uniquely into our human history in one man, our Savior Jesus the Christ.

I suppose almost all Christians believe that in Jesus we have somehow seen the face of God; Jesus has revealed to the world something extremely important about the nature and purposes of God (as well as about how we are each one of us to live as a child of God.) The Christ has come among us to show us, unmistakably, once for all, the eternal love of God.

But since the first few centuries following the birth and resurrection of Jesus, Christians have not been able to agree about one very central issue. Jesus reveals the nature of God—God who wants to redeem us; God who wants to reconcile us who have sinned, who have chosen the painful way of separation, back into right relationship with Him.

Interesting: Christians have long and hard disagreed about the ultimate success of God’s efforts in Christ to “save the world,” to reconcile every body and every thing in it. In fact, outsiders might well question whether we are all worshiping the same God, since our responses to this question—of how well God manages to reconcile every last person and entity back to Himself—vary so emphatically. In other words: God came among us in Christ to win back a fallen, miserable world. Is He going to do it?

To oversimplify, countless themes and verses in the Bible can be summed up into three sets of premises. The trouble is these three themes cannot logically be made to agree with each other. They are inherently inconsistent:

- 1) It is God’s intention and purpose to redeem all sinners, all the world, to Himself
- 2) Since God is all-powerful, God is capable of redeeming all sinners to Himself
- 3) Some sinners will never be reconciled to God, given the reality of free will, and will therefore either cease to exist or will suffer eternal punishment

You see the dilemma: no one can believe all three of these at once, but the Bible seems to endorse all three of them. (For example: if you accept the first two—God loves everyone, will not rest until every last sinner, every lost sheep, has finally been brought safely Home—and also, God is all-powerful—then that would mean God *will* save everyone in the end. But if #3 is true, God does not save every one. If you take the first and third: God loves everyone and wants to rescue everyone, but not everyone “makes it”—then the second must not be true: God must *not* be all-powerful to accomplish His will. Some accept the second and third premises: God is all-powerful, but some people are not eternally saved—it must therefore be that #1 is not true: God must not desire that *all* are reconciled into eternal life with Him in the end. [Historically, most of Christendom has been taught this position.]

Anyway: nobody can have it all three ways. There’s plenty of support in the Bible for each of these three premises, but they cannot all be fit together. It has nothing to do with being liberal or conservative, believing the Bible is inerrant or not.

Theologians and Bible scholars end up doing a lot of finessing and redefining to make it appear otherwise, but I believe everybody who is being honest ends up accepting two and rejecting one of these mutually exclusive conceptions about the final redemptive purpose of God. (I also want to acknowledge a book from which I am drawing again this Sunday; a book I believe is extremely helpful in its insights as to this question of salvation in Christ: *The Inescapable Love of God*, by Thomas Talbott.)

Sorry if this is all too theoretical so far. But don't you think it matters, a lot, what kind of God has revealed Himself in the Word of God, Jesus the Christ? What does the Bible say, in dozens, hundreds of places? For position 1, check out texts such as 2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" or Lamentations 3:22 "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases...for the LORD will not reject forever..." or John 12:32, when Jesus promises "If I be lifted up from the earth, I will bring all people to Myself." For position 2, see many such verses as "God accomplishes all things according to His...will" [Eph 1:11] or Ps 115:3: "My counsel shall stand, and I, [the LORD] will accomplish all My purpose...I will bring it to pass..." For position 3, hear such chilling verses as "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" [Mt 25:46] or Eph 5:5: "Be sure of this: no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy, or idolator [one whose life shows a pattern of worshiping other gods over the living God] has any inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ..." We are so used to reading these types of verses, and they seem so familiar, it may come as a surprise now to learn that they cannot all be true at the same time: that 1) God wants all to share eternal life with Him; 2) God can bring about whatever He desires, and 3) Some people will be shut out from eternity with Him.

How do we make our way out of this quandary? There is everything at stake in how we resolve this question. Do we worship a God who is not quite all that powerful—God's bark has been louder than His bite all these centuries? Are we to worship a plenty powerful God who can accomplish everything He chooses—but who must be a Tyrant or a Demon since He doesn't want to save everybody, whether a few or most of the people in the world, since there are more than 4 billion people alive who are not Christians.

Going back nineteen centuries, the discussion has been joined. (For a number of decades the disagreements came to more than discussion.) We can either go back to the Bible and underline certain of our favorite verses with more vigor and shout them with more volume—or we can back off—especially during Advent—and pay attention to the life of Jesus.

You already know this attention quickly leads us to Good Friday and to Easter Sunday—I'm not sure there's any theme in our Christian life, or in the New Testament, which, followed deep enough and far enough, does not lead us back to the cross. Jesus the Christ, God the Son, freely and obediently going even to His death, shows us the loving, reconciling love of God for us more than any collection of Bible verses. God has come down to show us decisively: "God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." [Romans 5:8] "Us" here is surely synonymous with "sinners." Christ died for us all, from Saddam Hussein to us more nicely-behaved sinners.

Since we're still in Advent, however, let's also continue to pay attention to the reasoning of the apostle Paul on this question, this predicament of the three premises. Has there been a more brilliant interpreter of the life and work of Jesus, and what it means for the world? Has there been a sinner more dramatically or graciously rescued

from His status of sinner, who lived out the rest of his life more appreciative of that rescue accomplished by the risen Christ?

I hope you'll take time to read your way thru chapters 9 thru 11 in Paul's crowning theological work, Romans. (These three chapters make up one whole, so if you quit in chapter 9 you may end up with the totally opposite conclusion Paul reaches after developing quite thoroughly this matter of what becomes of sinners, in the end. (Like someone perpetually frustrated because all the signs in the neighborhood say "NO PARKING"—but how misleading if the driver never reads on to the conclusion which qualifies the beginning: "3-5 a.m. Saturdays.")

Specifically, Paul reflects upon the status of his own people, the Jews. It bothers Paul no end that so few of the chosen people, his family, are turning their lives over to follow the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus. What will become of them, if they continue to fail to recognize Him, to gladly submit to Him? What will become of people who ignore or even turn their back on Jesus?

Paul begins with his re-definition of what it means to be a child of God. No longer, after Jesus, does anyone need to be "a child of the flesh"—that is, genetically a descendent of Abraham and Sarah, a biological Jew. What counts is anyone who is a child of the promise: anyone who will trust God, regardless of ethnicity, is a child of God. Gospel rather than Law. [9:1-9]

Paul expressly touches upon, and upholds, the sovereignty of God to elect, to save, to include or exclude whom He will: "As it is written, I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau; I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and compassion on whom I will have compassion...It all depends not on human will, but on God who shows mercy." [vv13-15] Some stop here, and conclude that God plays favorites (theme #3), as if God chose to hate the baby Esau before he was ever born. (A look at this verse in Malachi corrects this understanding, by the way: in context it is saying God is displeased with the way the descendants of Esau, the Edomites, have turned out—not that God chose one of the two pre-born twins to love, one to hate, just because He is God. If not this, could you imagine Jesus cruising the maternity ward, pointing to one newborn baby "you I love" and another "you I hate, it's into the everlasting flames with you." You're right—it is unthinkable.)

Instead, Paul does not conclude God will be cruel to whomever He pleases—Paul restates a prominent theme of the Old Testament: despite what people deserve, God keeps His covenant with a steadfast, unwavering love. Paul asserts that God gives us better than we deserve—not worse.

Next Paul comes to grips with the historical reality of the era: why were so many Jews, children of the promise, refusing to come to Jesus? He writes, "the elect obtained what they [Israel] were all seeking, but most failed, they were hardened against the gospel—by God." [10:7-10] Next Paul explains why he believes God has hardened their spirits so as to refuse to acknowledge Jesus as Lord: in order that the Gentiles, all us other people not biologically Jews, may experience reconciliation with God. For a certain time, Paul believes, God has caused some of the Jews to fail to respond to the Messiah in order to accomplish a far broader salvation.

But Paul is very clear—theirs is a temporary separation to help accomplish God's long-range strategic mission—reconciliation with everyone else, also. He asks, rhetorically, "I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall?" [11:11] His own answer: "If their

‘temporary’ stumbling means permanent riches for the rest of the world, and their ‘temporary’ defeat means riches for the non-Jews, then how much more will their later full inclusion mean!” [v 12] No subjunctive, no waffling: Paul believes they, the Jews—those who have trusted in Jesus and those who have not yet—will be fully included in eternal life, in time. (He repeats this, for extra measure, v 15: “If their rejection [of Christ] means the reconciliation of the world [everyone outside the Jews] then what will their [eventual] acceptance of Him be other than life redeemed from the dead!” Future tense: they will be redeemed from death.)

It’s while pondering the historic distance of the Jews, God’s original covenant people, from the Messiah, that Paul spells out another important principle—one we looked at last week also: “Note well the kindness and severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you [who are trusting in the risen Christ], provided you continue in His kindness—otherwise you, too, will be cut off.” [11:22] Paul makes explicit: the nature of God is love. Two opposite but complementary sides of the divine coin of the character of God are severity and mercy. Two complementary elements in the process of salvation are severity and mercy. How you experience the character of God all depends: when you resist Him—whether with aggressive rebelliousness, with condescending disdain, with apathetic disinterest—you are on target to experience the love of God as severity, as judgment. Especially when I need to be set straight, sometimes it feels severe to be on the receiving end of the mercy of God.

Paul concedes it’s a mystery why his family, the Jews, have been so slow to respond to Jesus. Still, despite the mystery of the present status of temporary separation, Paul concludes with conviction: “All Israel will be saved.” [v 26] Did we all know this, do our Christian friends: “the Bible says”... “*all* Israel, *all* the Jews, will be saved.” (He doesn’t say those who have responded to Jesus, those who have become Christians: Paul says “all.”)

Paul explains himself further. “As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake”—that is, specifically, temporarily, with respect to their lack of response to the gospel, the good news of God’s love in Christ Jesus, in this limited respect they are still opposed to God. But as regards election, as regards their ultimate destiny and relationship with God, “they are beloved” by God. They’re OK! They’re in! Why? “The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.” God will not change His mind, will not go back on His word. God will not break His covenant promise to the Jews any more than will God break His promise to us Christians, to His children of the second covenant in Christ.

“For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that God may, in the end, be merciful to all.” [v 32] I believe this assurance pertains, in principle, to all. God’s mercy, in the end, will overcome our temporary disobedience. God’s permanent reconciliation will, in the end, overcome our temporary separation. Given our separation from God, God’s love will often seem to us as wrath, or severity—but in the end, we will not be able to hold out against God’s loving purpose and God’s overcoming power. (We’ll have to revisit how God is going to accomplish this all without abridging our free will on a coming Sunday—but for now, I believe God can and will bring about His salvation for all.)

(Some might assume I have been less than honest in representing Paul, having focused on one atypical text of Paul’s, and ignoring so much of what he has written to the

contrary. But I think not: these three chapters, Romans 9-11, are not casual material; he develops this question of the salvation of the Jews at great length. (Incidentally, a similar theme is developed separately, over the span of several paragraphs, in Romans 5: same conclusion, only more broadly applied. The gist of his logic there is this “Sin came into the world thru the first Adam, and so death spread to all people. For if *all* have died through the first Adam’s trespass, how much more have the grace of God and the free gift of His grace abounded for “the many/all.” [vv 12-15] He concludes his seventeen-verse argument in this way: “Therefore, just as one man’s [Adam’s] trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s [Jesus’s] act of righteousness leads to justification and life for *all*.” [v 18])

You may or may not buy Paul’s conclusions. Most Christians have been taught otherwise: that God will eternally separate out some for heaven, some for hell—some for condemnation and some for salvation; some the wheat, some the weeds; some the sheep, some the goats. (More on this theme next Sunday.) As always, you are free to agree or disagree with my conclusions. I know I am preaching from a minority position within the Church, and I understand it might turn out that I was mistaken. But I notice throughout the gospels it’s the adversaries of Jesus go broke betting against wideness of the love of God. They thought they knew who was “in,” who was forever “out.” Jesus kept surprising them. “You can’t heal on the Sabbath, Jesus.” “You can’t hang out with prostitutes, with lowlives, Jesus.” “You can’t mingle with the lepers, the outcast, Jesus.” Jesus kept saying, “You don’t understand the love of God. Watch Me.”

I had been taught otherwise. I confess I did not understand God’s salvation in this way until recently, although my better instincts probably already did. What would you do if you were called by the funeral director in town, from time to time, with the request to please perform the funeral of a man who never apparently wanted anything to do with Jesus, and was certainly never baptized. What would you do: say “I believe in a God who extends no hope to sinners” and refuse to take the funeral? Or look to Jesus, and trust that God is more sad about this man’s alienated life than the man himself? Does the grace of God not cover such a one? Does the love of God poured out so abundantly thru Christ on the cross, not quite extend to this embittered or ignorant sinner? Is the nature of God toward this man who has died in his sins so different from the nature of God toward us church folks, who die trusting we are well beloved? Isn’t the difference in the response, rather in than the nature of God? And were you and I so speedy and so decisive in our own response to Jesus, to the Word of God spoken so lovingly and long to us? Are we so unwavering in our obedience that we dare rest our status on anyone other than our Lord and Savior?

Accept this logic or not—that is, if positions 1 and 2 are true: God wants to include everyone in the eternal feast, and God is fully able to accomplish His will—that means that position 3 is not: God will not send some sinners eternally to torment, in hell—how do you respond, in your heart? I fear that some not only do not believe that eventually God’s going to win over every last sinner, but that some do not want to believe it.

Fear, pain, hurt, our own being “unreconciled” with God and others get in our way. I think of those misguided knots of people who turn out, gleeful, at the gates of San Quentin when there’s to be an electrocution. I think of the unrepentant henchmen of Saddam Hussein, responsible for the systematic torture of hundreds of thousands of their

fellow citizens. I think of those in Darfur responsible for the butchery of so many on such a large scale. I think of you and me, sometimes slow to approach those whom we have wronged, or who have wronged us, in order to try to be reconciled. I think of our own slowness to forgive, our reluctance to keep praying for others and turning the wrongs we have suffered back to the Holy Spirit, over and over again, until finally we are able to move on and grow again.

I hope we all think of the mind of Christ, the attitude of the Father [Luke 15] toward each of us wayward sons and daughters... "So the grown son set off and went back to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—my best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!

And they began to celebrate."

Romans 9:8-16; 11:11-15; 22, 25-32

9:8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.

9 For this is what the promise said, "About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son."

10 Nor is that all; something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor Isaac.

11 Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue,

12 not by works but by his call) she was told, "The elder shall serve the younger."

13 As it is written, "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau."

14 What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!

15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

16 So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.

11: 11 So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.

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!

13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry

14 in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them.

15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!

11:22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.

11: 25 So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.

26 And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, "Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob."

27 "And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins."

28 As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors;

29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

30 Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience,

31 so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.

32 For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.