

WHY PEOPLE ARE WORTH IT

Scriptures: Romans 11:25-32; Romans 9:1-8

The comic strip Calvin and Hobbes did not have what you would call a high view of human nature. In one of the strips Calvin says to his pet tiger Hobbes, “Do you think babies are born sinful? That they come into the world as sinners?” Hobbes replies, “No, I think they’re just quick studies” (April 3, 1993). In another strip Calvin asks Hobbes, “Do you believe in the devil? You know, a supreme evil being dedicated to the temptation, corruption, and destruction of man?” Hobbes replies, “I’m not sure man needs the help” (April 6, 1992).

Apparently some of you who submitted questions of faith agree with Hobbes. Here is one of the questions I received: “Considering God’s knowledge of the fall of mankind, why did God create us?” Another asked, “How do we recognize and deal with an evil person?” A third wondered, “How do you love those who refuse to help themselves?”

If it is any comfort, the apostle Paul has the same questions about his own nation, the people of Israel. You can hear Paul’s frustration in our first scripture lesson—Romans 9:2-4:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, and the promises.

Paul’s countrymen, the Jews, the people of Israel, were the very people who should have welcomed the Messiah. But they rejected him, at least most of them did. I can imagine Paul writing a question of faith: “How do you love those who refuse to help themselves?”

In the next paragraph Paul raises another question. He talks about predestination. He suggests that God knew ahead of time that some of the Israelites would reject Jesus.

Now this is not a sermon about predestination. You will have to ask about that in another question of faith. But here is Paul’s concern: If God knew ahead of time that the people of Israel would reject Jesus, then why did God bother with them for all those years. God brought the people of Israel into existence by giving a child to a 100 year-old man named Abraham and his 99 year-old wife Sarah. When that child grew up, he had a child named Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, and that is how the people of Israel got their name. Later during a famine God provided food for Jacob’s family in Egypt. Then Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, made slaves of them. But in the time of Moses God rescued them from slavery and led them for forty years through the wilderness to the promised land. But even in the promised land they struggled. God had to save them over and over from enemies internal and external. Even when they were defeated by their enemies and taken into exile, God brought them back. Why would God go to all that trouble, why would God work so hard to save these people, if in the end they are destined to be rejected? It is like the question of faith someone asked: “Considering God’s knowledge of the fall of mankind, why did God create us?”

The answer is found in our second scripture lesson. Listen again to Romans 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.”

Why did God create people, if God already knew they would mess things up? Because God knows how to bring good out of our lives even when we mess things up.

Historically, an interesting thing happened when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem began to arrest Jesus’ followers. The message of Jesus was taken to the Gentiles. The book of Acts describes this process. When Christians in Jerusalem were persecuted for preaching about Jesus, they fled next door to Samaria, and many Samaritans became believers. When persecution reached Samaria, they went further, preaching about Jesus in Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Italy. From there the message of Jesus spread to other places in Europe: France, Germany, England, and Ireland. Eventually it was brought from Europe to America, and that is how we came to know about Jesus. It was the very rejection of Jesus by his own people that allowed the rest of us to learn about Jesus. That is the situation Paul describes earlier in Romans 11:11 when he says, “Through the stumbling of the people of Israel, salvation has come to the Gentiles.”

But that is still not the end of the story. For God is not finished with the Jews, the people of Israel. In the next verse, Romans 11:12, Paul says, “Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!” That sets the stage for what Paul says in our second scripture lesson:

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. And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, “Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.” “And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.”

Israel may have rejected God, but God has not rejected them. As Paul says in verse 29: “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” God’s promises to the people of Israel will still be fulfilled. God has a way of not giving up on people, which is why we can’t give up on them either.

This does not mean that people can avoid the consequences of their actions. One of the other questions of faith submitted this summer asked, “When God forgives us, do we still reap the consequences of our sin?” The answer is yes. In the Bible the people of Israel suffered all kinds of consequences for their rejection of God: wasted years in the wilderness, defeat by the Philistines, exile by the Babylonians, occupation by the Greeks, and finally the complete destruction of their city and temple by the Romans. On numerous occasions God’s people in the Bible reaped the consequences of their sin, and so do we.

But the good news is that our sin and its consequences do not have the last word. That is the final point Paul makes in verse 32: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.” Yes, most of the people of Israel rejected Jesus, but because of that God’s grace came to us Gentiles. We are the beneficiaries of their rejection. But that is not the

end of the story. Just as we received the message of Jesus by grace, one day so will the Jews, the people of Israel, and when that happens God's patience and persistence will finally pay off.

Let me close with a story. When Larry Whitson arrived at the Union Gospel Mission in 1995, his clothes were still damp from a suicide attempt. Overwhelmed by depression over a broken marriage and guilt for a crime he never confessed, Larry jumped off a bridge into the Spokane River. But instead of drowning the current spit him out on a sandy beach, sort of like Jonah. After that, Larry walked aimlessly across town, his clothes dripping wet, until he came to the Union Gospel Mission. He was greeted by another resident of the Mission who asked him why he was there. Larry told him the dark secrets of his past, things he had never shared with anyone else. He was certain the man would despise him for what he had done. How do you deal with an evil person? But the man said to him, "A month ago I would've called you scum, but today I understand God's love differently, and I can call you my brother."

As Larry began to experience God's grace, God's unconditional acceptance, he realized what he had to do. He turned himself in to the Spokane Police and made a full confession of his crime. As a result, he was sentenced to eight months in prison. Even when God forgives us, we still reap the consequences of our actions. But those consequences do not have the last word. When Larry got out of prison he returned to the Mission and joined their Life Regeneration Program. He has since found a house, a job, and has begun a Bible study in his neighborhood. He recently wrote a poem called "Bruised Reed" based on Isaiah 42. It goes like this:

There was a time my life was like a reed which had been bruised
Tormented by the childhood wounds I suffered through abuse;
And there were those who often said my worthless life was lost
Too bad, they said, but what's the use, it's such a helpless cause.

Adulthood came and true to form, expectancy fulfilled,
My stone cold heart and darkened soul brought forth a stubborn will
The reed became smoldering flax that stank for all to see
Abandoned now by all I knew there seemed no hope for me.

But Jesus Christ will never break a reed that has been bruised
And never will He quench a flax that smolders from abuse;
He has a purpose all his own for everything he does
But when it comes to you and me
He loves us just because ...

Blind eyes are made to see again, deaf ears are made to hear,
A cold and stony, darkened heart turns soft when love appears;
And Jesus helps us most of all through warmth of love He brings
Though undeserving, His embrace has healing in its wings.

That, friends, is why people are worth it.

- Ken Onstot