

## God Is in Control

August 20, 2017

### Romans 11: 1-2a and 29-32

*<sup>1</sup>I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup> God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew... <sup>29</sup> for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. <sup>30</sup> Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, <sup>31</sup> so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. <sup>32</sup> For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.*



Today our journey with this vase ends. As you can see, it is mostly whole. Week by week, piece by piece, it has come back together. What

once was shattered is now almost whole. But the vase is not, nor will it ever be, perfect again. If you look closely at the picture, you can see a crack in the vase. And such it is with us. From time to time we too will be broken and maybe even shattered. And like this vase, we can trust that God will always be at work in each of us, working to bring healing and wholeness to our brokenness. Let us pray.

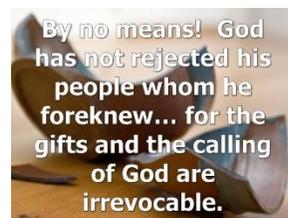


Paul opens today's passage with a question we have all asked or thought: "*I ask, then, has God rejected his people*"? In fact, we have probably asked this question a few times.



Sometimes the question is personal as life has brought us pain or hurt or brokenness. In these times when we experience pain or hurt or brokenness, we can easily get to the place of questioning God and feeling as if He were absent. The question can also be corporate. When one looks at the recent events of Charlottesville, where a young man drove his car into a group of anti-rally protestors, killing one woman and injuring 35 others, not to mention the two state troopers killed in the helicopter crash while investigating the incident, one wonders where and how God was and is present in these events. For many, it can be difficult to see how God is at work in this tragedy. For others, there are certainly questions and doubts as they process and deal with what has happened. As followers of Jesus Christ, we hope and pray and trust that God is present to the many people affected by this loss, bringing them healing and hope and peace and all else that is needed in the midst of this tragic situation.

Paul continues in our passage today to reveal the answer to the question about God rejecting his people. As we continue in the Word, we read, *"By no means! ... God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew... for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable"*. God has certainly not rejected His people. Yes, there is tragedy and pain and hurt in the world that causes brokenness. But there is also great love and hope and good in the world. God has not and will not give up on us. God has not rejected us. As Paul writes, the gifts that God gives each of us are gifts that stay with us our whole lives. And once God has called us into a relationship, that calling is also something that remains with us all of our lives. Once we have chosen to declare "Jesus is Lord" and commit our lives to walking with Him as our Savior, we are saved. This becomes our 'status',

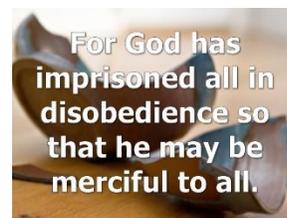


if you will. Yes, we may wander and we may even sin, but we remain saved. Once we claim the gift of salvation and eternal life, that gift is ours for all eternity. As we talked about a few weeks ago, there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God that we find through Jesus Christ. Nothing, never ever, can separate us from God's love.



As we think about our lives and the trials and tribulations we go through and as we think about the senseless violence and unimaginable hatred that exists in our world, sometimes we can wonder if God is really in control. Yes, we know beyond a doubt that we cannot be separated from God's love and His saving grace, but we can wonder about who is in control of this world. We ask questions like, "Why do people kill one another in the streets? Why do some have more than enough while others struggle daily with poverty? Why do I lose the ones I love?" These are just some of life's unanswerable questions.

Help in beginning to understand these questions comes in today's passage. In verse 32 Paul writes, *"For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all"*. For Paul, the rebellion of all of creation is purposed by God so that He can show mercy and forgiveness to all. As Paul struggled with the Jews rejecting Jesus while the Gentiles accepted Jesus as Lord, he came to see that this was part of God's plan. The Gentile's obedience opened a way for others to also become obedient and to find a way to salvation. This continues to be a part of God's plan.



Author Jacqueline Lewis writes about this as well. She writes:

*"God is on a mission. God has a plan. We may screw it up, but God works through it all. God calls a people and chooses them. They are disobedient, and God saves them anyway. They are taken captive and once again freed. God gives the Law and knows it will not be obeyed. God sends judges and prophets. God sends the Christ, the rock of salvation, hewn out of God's own people. They reject Jesus; and this, even this, God uses so that Gentiles may be grafted into the plan of God's salvation. Oh yes, God has a purpose and a plan. God is in control".*



Over the past five weeks, as we have worked through the middle section of the book of Romans, we have seen how God is in control. We have seen how God repairs the brokenness in our souls through grace and His unwavering, inseparable love. We have seen how God overcomes the brokenness in our relationships, reconciling us and drawing us together as His beloved children to become the whole family of God. Ultimately, we know that God's plan is the restoration of all creation. Without a doubt, we know that one day all things will be made new again when Jesus returns to establish God's kingdom here on earth. All this we know.

As faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we can trust that God is on a mission, working all things for good, for restoration, for healing. Although the ways of God are mysterious and beyond our simple human understanding and although

our human history twists and turns in ways that seem to defy God's goodness, we know in our hearts that God's purpose is mercy and God's method is grace. Let me repeat that: God's purpose in mercy and God's method is grace. Sometimes we are limited in both our understanding and in our vision. Sometimes we have difficulty seeing beyond ourselves. Yet God is in control. God is at work. To illustrate this, I would like to share a story from our worship and picnic in the city park last Sunday.



Last Sunday after worship and when most of us had eaten, a man who looked a little rough around the edges wandered up the sidewalk. One of our ladies went over and invited him to get some food. We had plenty. Another group was sitting at the tables and a comment was made about the man showing up just in time to get some free food. Their opinion was that he should not eat if he did not bother to come to worship. And, as Paul Harvey used to say, now, for the rest of the story. Later that night another person shared with me the conversation that she and the man had as he sat and ate his hot dogs and chips and watermelon. He shared how much he liked the singing and Pastor Darlene's message. He was very grateful for the chance to hear her speak in person and to feel God move in his heart. And, yes, he was also thankful for the food. I am glad he came to eat. If all he got Sunday night was some food for his hungry stomach, I am glad that at least we could have offered that. But even more so, I am grateful that God spoke into his heart that night as he heard the Word proclaimed. I am joyful that someone allowed him to share that with them, and now with us. Yes, God's purpose is mercy. God's method is grace.

Just like the woman who invited the man to partake in some food and like the woman who went over and spent time talking with the man, you and I are invited to participate in God's plan. We are invited to share in God's mission of restoration and reconciliation, working with God to heal the broken places. The question for us then is: how do we respond with our lives? How do we, as followers of Jesus Christ, become active agents of God's work to restore and heal the brokenness in our lives and out there in the world?



I believe this question basically has two kinds of answers and both apply to the two target audiences – to us as individuals and to the world out there. The first kind of answer is short-term and is usually temporary. The second kind of answer is more long-term and goes much deeper. Ideally, the first answer leads to the second answer.

Let us begin with ourselves. How do we restore and heal the brokenness in our own lives? The short term begins with identifying the hurt or brokenness and acknowledging the causes and the roles we play. We must be able to name the hurt or brokenness so that it can be addressed. From here, we begin to shift to the long-term. In most cases, this longer process begins with forgiveness. We must be willing to forgive ourselves or maybe it is forgiving the one who hurt us. To forgive as Christ forgives us is a good place to begin. To forgive and to let go as God does with our sins is a great practice too. The next step is usually reconciliation or rebuilding what was broken or damaged. This may be learning to trust again or it may be totally starting over and developing a new friendship

based on safe and healthy boundaries or it may be figuring out how to just get along well. Our hurt and brokenness often deals with relationships – whether at work or at school or at home – and these are long haul relationships. At times our hurt and brokenness can be with God. The steps are still the same. If it is sin, for example, we must begin by acknowledging the sin and our role in it. We must identify what leads us to that sin and what the implications and consequences are when we fall to that temptation. Then we must repent and seek God’s forgiveness so that we can be reconciled to Him, finding forgiveness along the way. Next, we must rebuild the relationship and our connection to God. Lastly, we must work to follow through on our repentance, making choices that help us to resist the temptation and to stay true to our faith.

When we seek to become active agents of God’s work to restore and heal the brokenness out there in the world, we begin by identifying the needs that exist in our world. For example, this past week, I met with the school administrators to begin to identify some needs that they may have this school year that our church could possibly meet. This will be an ongoing conversation as the school year progresses and it could be as simple as providing some notebooks and pencils. It could involve providing a meal one day during in-service meetings. These are all short-term efforts. Feeding a man in the park was a short-term answer to his needs. Whether providing school supplies or a meal, these short-term fixes are and always will be necessary and, unfortunately, sometimes they are all we can offer. To address long-term solutions to poverty is a long-haul proposition. It requires a great commitment on both sides. The root causes of something like poverty run deep and often there are multiple factors at play that contribute to the hurt and brokenness. For example, when poverty is all one has ever known,

then all their thoughts and decisions come from the perspective of want and scarcity. I would guess that none of us has had to choose between feeding our children or putting gas in the car so we could get to work. We have never had to decide between paying the electric bill or the propane bill – to choose between light and heat in the dead of winter. When these decisions are all one has ever known, making a different decision is hard. So, to step in and feed someone is the easy, short-term fix. To help pay the propane bill is a relatively easy but short-term fix. It is a much longer and deeper commitment to begin to walk side by side with someone struggling with the root causes of poverty and to help them learn to find and keep a job, to budget and to make good purchases, and to manage their money. Just as living without food is foreign to us, thinking and planning long-term is foreign to one who has never done so. When we struggle with a sin and return to it over and over again in spite of our desire to repent and change, God is patient. He picks us back up, dusts us off, forgives us, and gets us moving along the right path again. So it is with someone who struggles with life and finances and decision-making. We must be willing to be patient and loving and kind and encouraging and to see it through to the end.

When we begin to address this question, whether in our own lives or out there in the world, we must realize that it is hard to restore the hurt and brokenness. On our own, we cannot do this. In closing, I return to excerpts from the quote from Miss Lewis that I shared earlier.



*"God is on a mission. God has a plan... God calls a people and chooses them... Oh yes, God has a purpose and a plan. God is in control".*

Yes, God is on a mission and, yes, God has a plan. He calls us. He chooses us. God calls us, as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, to be agents of His work. God desires to bring healing and wholeness to our hurt and brokenness. And yes, His plan includes us. God's purpose is mercy and God's method is grace. He freely offers both to you and to me. Without price, without requirements, without strings. And God calls us to join Him in bringing the world mercy and grace as well.



Five weeks ago, we began with a small piece of this vase. Each week it has become more whole and less broken as we have looked at how God desires to repair the brokenness in our lives through grace and His unwavering, inseparable love. We have also seen how God overcomes the brokenness in our relationships, reconciling us and drawing us together, with each other and with Him. And, ultimately, we know that God's plan is the restoration of all creation – to one day make all things new.

When we look at this other side of the vase, we see there is a hole. A small part of the vase broke into teeny, tiny pieces and is gone forever. We will always be able to see the cracks and this hole will never go away. Today it is more whole than



it has been in quite some time and that is good news for this vase. But you and I have better news. God desires to heal our brokenness. God desires to make us whole again. The better news for you and I is that God heals us completely. God will remove all the cracks and scars and holes and make us new again. God's purpose is to offer mercy and His method is to give grace. God invites us to accept His mercy and to live within His grace. He also invites us to be a part of His work in the world to bring healing and wholeness to a world in need. May our response be to accept His invitations. Let us pray.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) When have you recently experienced God healing your hurt and/or your brokenness? What allowed you to experience this?
- 2) How can you see yourself being a part of bringing healing and wholeness to someone or someplace you know? What is the first step?
- 3) How do you experience or sense God's mercy and grace at work in your own life? How can this translate to helping others know mercy and grace?