

This morning we will conclude our consideration of the Romans sub-focus on the condition of the Jews and Gentiles. The primary text is that of Romans 11 that is not in the readings. We will look at this more closely now.

Paul begins in verse seven by summing up the position of his Hebrew people. While many had sought after what they believed to be true they did not obtain it because, as discussed last week, they tried to serve God to ritual and law obedience in their actions but their hearts were far from Him. Those however who did seek God in integrity of heart did find Him, but sadly this was by far a smaller number of the whole. For Paul this is was an ongoing source of suffering and anguish. Many of his own people were losing the salvation offered to them.

Paul notes that for those whose hearts were determined to walk in the wrong direction, God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear. Even until Paul's day this continued and so it does even to our day. This Paul terms a "hardening". This is a term worth considering. What is meant by this term "hardening" used a number of times throughout the Scriptures?

The term used in Romans references a phrase from the Hebrew Old Testament that speaks of a "*hardening of the heart*" or a "*locking of the neck*". It means to be strong against something or someone, difficult to move or change, stubborn. You might know people like this in a more general sense. Once they have made up their mind nothing will change them - not logic, not emotion, not even a changed situation. Minds like concrete – thoroughly mixed up and permanently set. It's ok, you don't need to name them! In Exodus 4:21 and 7:13 we are told that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh and the Egyptian people (14:17) against the Hebrew people. In 1 Samuel 6 we get the same terminology is used when the Philistines complained to their priests that the Ark of the Covenant caused tumours to occur amongst the Philistine population. The priests asked the people, "Why did you harden your hearts against the God of Israel?" Another way to interpret this term would be to "make heavy". People's heart were made heavy in their movement away from God.

Now the obvious question here is: why would God do this? It is hardly fair is it? Is this a form of the predetermination argument whereby God acts as a puppet master determining in advance everyone's actions and their ultimate destiny with Him or in eternal darkness? No it is emphatically not. God does not work this way. In every instance God is honouring the decision of heart and action that the individuals have made for themselves ... in effect affirming the consequences of the decision they have made. It is also why not everyone is caught up in this as a faithful remnant always comes through, even when judgement is executed against a people. How can we know this? Look at the case of Pharaoh. From very early on we learn that Pharaoh knew nothing of Daniel and his history and that of the Jewish people. Instead Pharaoh determined from the start to make the lives of the Hebrew people miserable as he considered them a threat and possible allies with enemies of the Egyptian people. Pharaoh had determined his course and that of the Egyptian people who were all too happy to see the Hebrew people made into slaves and servants and treated cruelly. Their decision and actions, their choice, was acknowledged by God. God hardened their hearts in the direction they had chosen so that God's purposes might be displayed unequivocally. In Exodus we see that each time Pharaoh made a decision against the Hebrew people his heart was further strengthened or hardened against them. The consequences became clear as the narrative unfolded.

Pharaoh's choice brought suffering upon the Hebrew people. When Moses arose and told Pharaoh that God had appointed him a prophet to tell Pharaoh the Hebrew people were to leave Egypt, Pharaoh refused to listen. The consequence was initially increased suffering for the Hebrew people as Pharaoh made their work conditions harder. Ultimately however Pharaoh's disobedience increased suffering for himself and the Hebrew people as they suffered

plagues and culminating in the loss of the lives of their firstborn, including Pharaoh's own son. Suffering came upon the Egyptian people. This is but one example in the Scriptures, there are many. Sin, in all its various forms, brings suffering.

One further case worth mentioning is Jesus' response to seeing this attitude of heart in the people. In Mark 3 Jesus was in the synagogue when a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Jesus' enemies were looking for an excuse to accuse Him so Jesus chose the opportunity to essentially ask if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. The silence of His enemies made Jesus angry and we are told He was "deeply distressed at the stubbornness / the hardness of their hearts". When hearts are hard to God's will and what is truly good it is deeply distressing to Jesus. In the same way, Jesus, in Luke 19:41-44, wept over the fate of Jerusalem knowing what the consequences of its sin would be and the suffering that would come upon the nation.

Back to Romans then. Paul recognises that a hardening had come upon Israel but the question is why? Paul's answer is three-fold. First of all, God has not abandoned His Chosen People but rather allows their disobedience for a season. In Romans 11:11 Paul asserts that the Jewish people have not stumbled beyond recovery but rather that God has purpose in allowing this season of disobedience.

To his second point then: God has made salvation available to those who are not of Hebrew descent. Not by becoming Jewish proselytes, that would be to come under the Law and the requirement to meet the full and complete requirements of the Law which have already been demonstrably seen to be impossible for anyone. Rather God has allowed a grafting in of Gentiles by grace.

And his third point is that the Hebrew people, seeing the freedom, peace and love that the Gentiles enjoy in God's favour become jealous and recover their passion for the Lord and get back on track.

From these things Paul comes to a critical conclusion: God is both kind and stern. His loving kindness is displayed in His compassion for all of humanity and His plan to give all people the option to come to Him. But God is stern also in that all people are called to continue in belief, walking in the kindness of God, living as He wants us to in loving obedience and faith. When we make decisions against God, when we live unfaithfully, when we sin with increasing deliberateness, we will eventually wear the consequences, which will bring suffering. But walk in the goodness of God and He will bear with us through all the circumstances of life no matter how difficult and bring us through – Hebrew and Gentile alike.

Paul also reminds us that Israel is, willing or otherwise, fulfilling God's plan and from its people will be a remnant that will be saved. This continues until, and this is worth noting in Romans 11:25, things continue "*until the full number of Gentiles have come in*". In other words all of human history is working to a fixed timeframe that God has already planned. Then, when this has been achieved, Jesus will return to Zion and call together all of His people Hebrew and Gentile.

So, some key takeaways from this morning and the last couple of weeks:

- (1) God's economy is the way God is working out His plan through history.
- (2) While equally loved God has different paths by which Hebrew and Gentile believers are coming into His Kingdom but both require faith and a relationship with the Lord.
- (3) The Hebrew people are God's Chosen People affirmed and attested to by the Covenants which are irrevocable because God has initiated them and He is faithful to His word.
- (4) The Church comprises People of Promise, people who come to God by faith in Jesus Christ and this will of course include Hebrew and Gentile people.
- (5) God will not be mocked. He knows our hearts and the decisions we will make. He loves us to walk with Him in faith and to be obedience to what Jesus has taught and the Holy Spirit prompts. When we chose to walk otherwise our disobedience will bring suffering upon us and those around us as a matter of consequence and righteous judgement.

God's desire is to have mercy on everyone so great is His love, but we have to opt in. As Paul concludes, "Oh the depth of the riches of His wisdom and knowledge of God ...."

In the background of our readings these last few weeks has been the story of Joseph. Take time to read this again and think about it in terms of how God has woven all of the sub-themes and keys we have spoken about into Joseph's story. From his brother's evil intent in casting him into a cistern to how God used and blessed Joseph through to his brothers' and father's restoration. God is faithful and loving even when we are not and can turn what seems the worst situations into wonderful outcomes.

Amen