

ROOTS

by Steve Zeisler

One of my favorite comics is *Calvin and Hobbes*. Below is a conversation between Calvin, a six-year-old boy, and Hobbes, his stuffed tiger who is his companion in life:

Calvin: I've been thinking, Hobbes.

Hobbes: On a weekend?

Calvin: Well, it wasn't on purpose. I believe history is a force. Its unalterable tide sweeps all people and institutions along in its unrelenting path. Everyone and everything serves history's single purpose.

Hobbes: And what is that purpose?

Calvin: To produce me, of course. I'm the end result of history.

Hobbes: You?

Calvin: Think of it, thousands of generations lived and died to produce my exact specific parents, whose only reason for being, obviously, was me. All history up to this point has been spent preparing the world for my presence.

Hobbes: Hmm! Four-and-a-half billion years probably wasn't long enough.

Calvin: Now I'm here and history is vindicated.

Hobbes: So now that history has brought you, what are you going to do?

The last panel of the strip shows the two sitting in front of the television laughing as they hear, "You wascally wabbit!" History's purpose was to produce a six-year-old to watch cartoons on television.

C.S. Lewis calls the attitude that Calvin displayed in this comic strip "chronological snobbery." It is the notion that my generation, and people who think like me are at the pinnacle of human achievement. We judge everything that has gone before us as inferior. Of course, the corresponding assumption, is that every generation after ours will look back to this time as the the golden age; they will sit at our feet (mine in particular) and receive what we pass on to them with gratitude. What is being exposed in these notions is pride, the essential bit of us that defines what it means to be in rebellion against God.

Spiritual Pride

In Romans 9-11 Paul is asking hard questions about the Jewish people. Their history began with the faith of Abraham. They were given a unique calling, unique opportunities, unique responsibility, and unique information.

When the Jews as a nation (or the church as a community immitating them) make the observation that God has chosen them, that they are part of his plan, that they have been shown mercy from him, that they have his attention, that he hears their prayers, ---then pride has its greatest opportunity to express itself. Pride does its

most ruinous work when it can attach itself to spirituality. Romans 11:6 says, "And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." It is that last phrase that is important. Paul can imagine a situation in which grace is overturned. If we have earned the gracious response of God, or if we can presume on grace as something we deserve, then grace is no longer grace. We too often encounter in our hearts the power of human pride in religious matters. Mercy from God becomes entitlement over time. We begin to think that our accomplishments deserve unending praise, and our failures seem to be exceptions or modifications to the rule because of mitigating circumstances.

Spiritual pride expresses itself repeatedly in three ways. First, we devalue other people because we esteem ourselves so highly. If I am God's favorite, his chosen, his beloved; then everybody else must be less than me. So prejudice sets in and finds types, races, and organizations of people inadequate and cuts them off. It happened in Israel's history and it has happened in the history of Christian people as well.

Secondly, we become foolishly enthusiastic about our own accomplishments. We look at the things we do, think, and say and marvel at them, not recognizing how hollow and ordinary they really are. Our law-keeping and religious efforts strike us as magnificent when they are not at all.

Thirdly, we confuse intimacy with God for equality with him. God reaches out and touches us and lets us draw near to him. His heart is made plain to us. And over time, subtly, pride ends up saying in the human heart, "Because God is intimate with me, I must be very much like him, after all. Because he cares for me, he must see in me what he sees in himself."

Israel's Present and Future

Pride is especially ugly when we attach the name of God to it. And Romans 9-11 is an explanation of how people can be bound up in spiritual pride and how the advantages of knowing about God and his truth can be twisted into something that ends up actually driving us away from God.

Chapter 10 ends with Paul's quoting God as he speaks through the prophets,

"All day long I have held out my hands
to a disobedient and obstinate people."

This plaintive call summarized Israel's past history, but what about the present and the future? Those are the subjects that are taken up in chapter 11. In verse 1 Paul asks, "Did God reject his people?" And he answers, "By no means!" In verse 11 he asks a similar question: "Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?" And he answers, "Not at all!" He is affirming that both in the present and in the future Israel has a place, and he will use the metaphor of an olive tree to describe it. This metaphor is essentially of roots that have grown into the ground, a glorious flowering and fruitfulness in history to come, and in the interim branches that are a conduit for all the nutrition that is going to come from the roots. The branches anticipate the day when there will be flowering and fruitful fulfillment. They are not the most important part of the tree; they are not that which produces nourishment, nor are they the fruit and flower that are to come.

That is the history lesson for us. We are not the high point. Our experience of knowing God is not the greatest one. The music we love, the prayers we pray, and the joy we experience in Christian fellowship are not the first or the highest or the best thing that God has ever done. There is a greater day to come, and there is a deep root in the past. We will be taught by this, I hope, to see ourselves as ordinary people needing the mercy of God and not deserving any particular applause. We have a role to play in our generation, and we hope to pass on to the next generation humble faith in the God of history.

Let's begin reading in verses 1-10:

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah---how he appealed to God against Israel: "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the

only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written:

"God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes so that they could not see
and ears so that they could not hear,
to this very day."

And David says:
May their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them.
May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,
and their backs be bent forever."

The Remnant and the Hardened

Here Paul is writing about Israel in the present as it existed in his generation and still exists in ours. There are two aspects of Israel in the present. The first is what Paul identifies in himself and calls a remnant. In his generation and in every generation since there have been Jewish men and women who have grown up knowing their place in Jewish history and having Jewish identity, who came to faith in Christ. There are men and women in this church who were raised as Jews and who now are Christians, who love the Lord and serve him with a full heart. God has never allowed a generation that had no believing Jews. This remnant is the thread that is going to tie the root of the glory of Israel's past to the marvelous climax of history in which all Israel will be saved.

But the second aspect of Israel in the present regards those who have been hardened in every generation. Remember, when the nation went through the Exodus, the whole world spoke of the God of Israel and feared him; *Yahweh*'s name was on everyone's lips. But today, when most non-Jews think about the Jewish people as a whole or even about individual Jews they know, they do not usually think about God. The Jewish presence and impact on the world we live in today is not primarily religious. There are a great number of modern Jews who don't care about and are even militantly opposed to belief in God; you can be a very thorough-going Jew and an active atheist. Many non-Jews are attracted to and fascinated by the Jews; others oppose the Jews; but usually these reactions are for issues that have to do with politics, intellectual pursuits, commerce, or historic national claims. Religious Jews tend to speak of God within their communities not in the wider world.

What Paul is saying is this: While God will not allow the Jews to assimilate into other peoples and be lost, the great majority of them during any generation on earth do not care deeply for him, or touch the rest of the world for his sake. That is what he terms, "a spirit of stupor," a growing deafness and blindness. He says their backs are bent forever. Perhaps the metaphor he has in mind is that of the aging process that takes place in a person whose heart is not alive and vital and growing.

If you have been around people who have aged with a vital faith, a loving heart, moral courage, and a joyful spirit, you know that the aging process in them is a thing of beauty. The older they get, the more winsome, and gentle they become. We long to be around those who have learned all life's lessons and now, in old age, have much to share.

But if you know somebody who has grown old with nothing on the inside, whose character has never been formed in Christ, a selfish young person who has now become a selfish old person, the aging process is very negative. The deafer they get, the angrier they get. They cannot acknowledge the deafening has taken place---their problems are everybody else's fault. Some older people insist on driving when they can't see as

well as they should and their reflexes aren't very good, yet they angrily refuse to cooperate with those who are trying to help them. Paul is writing of the spiritual experience of the majority of Israel. They stumble and struggle without acknowledging the problem to themselves---and they offer nothing of God to the unbelieving world around them.

Life From the Dead

In verse 11 Paul now raises the question of the future of Israel:

Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

"Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?" Will Israel's refusal of God lead to the point when he finally refuses them and denies them a future? Not at all!

In the first section of chapter 11, Paul speaks of unbelieving Israel in very stark terms, but that is not the last word. Now he turns around and speaks of the Gentiles and of the glorious future that is going to come to Israel. There is a day coming when their faith will be as if life from the dead has encompassed the earth. If their failure has meant that God gave life to others, "much greater riches" will abound when their heart is turned back to the Lord in the future.

Do Not Be Arrogant, But Be Afraid

What Paul is systematically doing through this entire section is saying to every single group of people, "Don't be too impressed with yourself." In the first verses of this chapter he reminds the believing remnant of what Elijah said: "I'm the only one left, Lord." And God stopped him in the middle of this speech and said, "There are seven thousand other people. You're not the only one. Don't be too impressed with yourself." The remnant of believing Jews in any generation ought to say, "It is not by any works I've done that I am saved. It is a gift of grace that I am who I am." And when the church imagines itself taking the place of Israel---"Other branches were hacked off so I could be grafted in"---it should not be too impressed with itself. God can give life where there is none now. We are mere branches and have no basis to presume upon him. The last sentence in verse 20 is very important to this whole section: "Do not be arrogant, but be afraid." And verse 22 says:

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God....

The way Paul speaks of his ministry to the Gentiles is a bit unnerving, isn't it? He says, "I am the apostle to the Gentiles; that is my calling, and I am going to go for it for all I'm worth!" But why is that---because the Gentiles are so attractive and deserving of all this ministry? That isn't what he says. The reason he makes the most of his ministry to the Gentiles is because he longs for Israel to come back to the Lord: "If I can win

Gentiles, they will be envious; they will see life from God and return." It's a very backhanded sort of compliment, isn't it? Paul is enthusiastic about his ministry to the Gentiles not because of any moral beauty in the Gentiles but, because he longs so much for Israel to have faith.

I was once invited to a New Year's Eve party by a friend of mine. She had just broken up with her boyfriend. She was a good friend of mine and an attractive girl, and the party promised to be fun. I thought it was great; I kind of liked the attention. The party was fine, but at about 11:30 I realized she was looking across the room at her former boyfriend. Their eyes locked and sparks flew. At 11:45 they had circled around the dance floor and were much closer to each other. At the stroke of midnight she ran to him, embraced and kissed him. They re-established their relationship, eventually got married, and now live in Oregon with three kids!

I realized that my role at that party was not what I thought it was going to be. I thought I had been invited because I was so fun to be with. But what she really wanted was someone with her to make her boyfriend jealous so they could re-establish their relationship. To some extent that is what Paul is saying about his ministry to the Gentiles. It is rather deflating.

So Paul speaks of Israel and says, "Israel, don't be proud. You are an obstinate people of whom a majority in any generation don't believe; ears are stopped and eyes are blind." Then he turns to the remnant of Israel and says, "Don't be impressed with yourself. Your standing with God is a gift, not heroic attainment." And he turns to the Gentiles and says, "You're grafted in, but you could just as easily have not been chosen. Don't you be impressed with yourself."

This message is the exact antithesis of the way six year old Calvin read history. We should find ourselves saying, "Thank you," being not arrogant but afraid. And the fear that Paul has in mind here is not cowering terror, but the immense respect that God is due. When we realize that he is completely without limits, then we find ourselves reduced in our own estimation. "Look carefully at the kindness and severity of God." That is the direction in which our eyes should look, instead of trying to read history so that we come out on top, with all others deemed our inferior.

Faithful Forebears

I saw the movie *The Joy Luck Club* this week. It is a story about Chinese mothers and daughters and their interaction with each other. The daughters attempt to figure out why their mothers are the way they are, and what that implies for them. It is all about roots. It was interesting to me because I have a Chinese friend from Singapore who is traveling around China with her mother, and I got a postcard from her this week. She is engaged to be married to a man who was born and raised in Thailand, was educated in England, and is now a graduate student at Stanford. They are going to live the first part of their married life in this country. And what she said on the postcard was, "Mom and I are traveling around in China looking for our roots." Her life is and will be a blend of cultures. She wanted to go back and find out something about where she came from.

We do well to learn the lessons that others have learned in knowing the Lord, to emulate the faith of those who have gone before us, to recognize that we are just a section of the bank of a very long stream that is passing by. Our generation is not the earliest, foundational one; we didn't sink the roots deep into the soil of faith that everyone else has benefitted from. We may not be the last generation either, when an entire generation of Jews will come to faith and there will be such a startling knowledge of God that the earth will shake in that day. We are like the many generations past in which believing people had to trust God in their world. We would do very well to go back and read church history, learn from the lives of the saints, hear the conversations of the Bible, and observe the lives and experiences of those people.

Paul notes in the beginning of 2 Timothy that he is pleased to minister as his forefathers did. He sees himself as an apostle doing what the prophets and patriarchs, his forefathers before him, did. And then he turns to Timothy and says, "You too are fortunate to have faith; and you got your faith from your mother, and she got it from her mother." He is reminding Timothy that he stands in a stream of believing people as well.

We in this church can at times be too impressed with our love of the Bible and can look down our noses at denominations, congregations, and types of Christians who have fallen into various kinds of

unbelief--liberalism or something else--finding ourselves superior to them because they have lost the way; they haven't maintained the fire of conviction; they aren't as sold-out or as clear-headed as we are. But any time we find ourselves too impressed with our version of following God, verses 20 and 22 should call to us: "Do not be arrogant, but be afraid...Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God...."

Mercy On All The Disobedient

Paul ends the argument of this chapter in verses 30-32:

Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

Romans 9-11 began with Paul's remembering the Exodus. He said, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened and the Egyptians were stiffened in their resistance to God. And as a result of the hardening of Egypt, the Jewish nation was born by the miracle of the Exodus. God was able to give life to his people because of a hardening that happened to others." Now he is saying that things have turned around. It is the Israelites who have refused to accept their Messiah, who are hardened except for a remnant. And it is their hardness that has allowed the gospel to go to the Gentiles (including Egyptians) who were once hardened to give birth to them! So their unbelief has offered opportunity for other people to believe.

When churches lapse in their commitment, grow fat and self-impressed, and lose their way, God allows revival in other places. Over and over again, unbelief in one place leads to belief somewhere else. The wealthy churches are rebuked by the faith of the poor. Those who have grown to value themselves too much are rebuked by those whose faith is simple and pure and alive. The result is finally that we all find ourselves in the same boat. God has bound everyone over to disobedience that he might have mercy on everyone. No one is special. God is special, and his mercy is available only to those who are disobedient and who have acknowledge that fact.

After Paul looks at history from all these different angles, he finally finds himself able only to praise the God of whom he has been thinking. Romans 11:33 is one of the most beautiful doxologies in Scripture. Having seen all the ways God works, Paul finds himself astonished at the mind of God:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

"Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?"
"Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?"
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.

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