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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD AND ROMANS 9

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I

The term "Sovereignty of God" is not familiar to Lutheran ears; it is not a topic on which our dogmaticians have expressed themselves at any great length. Lutheran theologians specialize in doctrines clearly revealed in Scripture and avoid intellectualizing or theorizing on areas that Scripture does not elucidate. Especially do they refrain from contriving a master plan or blueprint of God's will and ways that is unsupported by Scripture. We are referring specifically to the Calvinist predilection for order, system, and plan in their theology; Calvinism has a preoccupation with organizing doctrines into a coherent whole which answers rationalistic probings, satisfies the ancient "*cur alii prae aliis?*", and finds God's dominant characteristic, His *sine qua non*, to be His SOVEREIGNTY.

Certainly, God is sovereign. He is sovereign in His omnipotence, His omniscience, His out-of-this-world superiority to all and every other. To BE God presupposes pre-eminence, absoluteness and self-essentialness. He is the INFINITE. But the sort of sovereignty which forms the core of Calvinist theology is an entirely different thing from that which we find before us in Romans 9. To the Calvinist, the nuclear essence of God is not love, but sovereignty. The sovereignty-oriented Calvinist would more likely say "God is God," while the grace-loving Christian will confess, "God is my God."

Although Calvin was a formidable theologian and a Bible student of high rank, he suffered from that all-pervading ailment afflicting many a theologian: theology had to "make sense," or it was not theology. God is a God of ORDER, or He is **not** GOD. God must by force of His divinity operate by blueprint, for being Master means having a Master-Plan, and nothing that He plans can fail to come to pass.

Order is heaven's first law. ¹

It is unthinkable that a God of infinite wisdom and power would create a world without a definite plan for that world. And because God is thus infinite, His plan must extend to every detail of the world's existence. ²

To this we might well agree, until we discover the deductions which are about to be drawn therefrom.

Election in creation, election in providence, and so election also to eternal life . . . the program of the history of the fall and redemption of the human race . . . the fall of Adam and all other sins which made that sacrifice (of Christ) necessary were in the plan.³

. . . and the reason why any are saved, and why one rather than another is saved, is to be found alone in the good pleasure of Him who ordereth all things after the counsel of His own will. . . .⁴

The doctrine of absolute predestination of course logically holds that some are foreordained to death as truly as others are foreordained to life. When some are chosen out, others are left not chosen. . . . This too is of God. We believe that from all eternity God has intended to leave some of Adam's posterity in their sins, and that the decisive factor in the life of each is to be found only in God's will.⁵

Those who hold the doctrine of Election but deny that of Reprobation can lay but little claim to consistency. To affirm the former while denying the latter makes the decree of predestination an illogical and lopsided decree.⁶

To which we respond: logic is not the criterion with which to adjudicate the enigma, but God's Word. If it be illogical, so much the worse for man's logic. What a small sacrifice for the true theologian to pay for continuing in His Word! One closing quotation to expose this perverse insistence on being logical, whether it agree with plain Scripture or not:

Hence if it is just for God to forbear saving some persons after they are born, it was just for Him to form that purpose before they were born, or in eternity. And since the determining will of God is omnipotent . . . it follows that He never did, nor does He now, will that every individual of mankind should be saved. If He willed this, not one single soul could ever be lost, "for who hath resisted His will?" If He willed that none should be lost, He would surely give to all men those effectual means of salvation without which it cannot be had. Now, God could give those means as easily to all mankind as to some only, but experience proves that He does not. Hence it logically follows that it is not His secret purpose or decretive will that all should be saved.⁷

And all this based on their view of God's sovereignty! Or, more accurately, based on the premise that God's sovereignty is of such a nature that when a sinner is lost, it must **logically** be so because God intended it that way from all eternity. Bible verses are used, for Calvinists also seek the Truth; but "Proof from Reason" stands side by side with the Truth, and the mindset of the Calvinist thus formed sees the Bible passages in a different light than does the typical non-Calvinist. Being preoccupied with the necessity, value, and validity of human ratiocination, the refrain echoes consistently in their presentations: ". . . this follows by the most **inescapable logic** . . . the only **intelligent** and Scriptural explanation of the facts . . . the plain teaching of the Scriptures and the **logical** counterpart of the doctrine of Election. . . ."

We want to preserve an open receptivity in our study of Romans 9 and any message it may have for us in regard to the Sovereignty of God, lest we approach the inspired message with preconceived notions which will perforce color our view of each and every verse. The Calvinist view of God's workings is that sovereignty dominates grace; in effect, sovereignty conditions grace so as to restrict grace unto the elect alone.

How are we to approach verses 11-23, that section which Calvinists view as supporting double predestination, based on their premise that God in His sovereign majesty chooses to predestine some individuals unto eternal life and others unto perdition? First of all, we remain aware of the context of the preceding verses as well as the general flow of thought from chapters 8 through 10.

II

As Paul enters into the subject of the plight and eternal destiny of his beloved countrymen, he does so with a heart-felt wrenching cry of anguish that they are not able to rejoice with him in the all-conquering love of Christ (8:35-39), from Whom nothing shall separate the believer. At the close of chapter 9 he presents the reason why they are not able to do so: they have not attained unto righteousness, because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though (they

could attain it) by works (vv. 31-33). Thus the inspired apostle does not present a view of grace being limited because of a negative factor in **God's** will, but it is grace limited because of **man's** perverse will. Chapter 10 expands upon the problem they had created for themselves, in that they sought to establish their own righteousness, and did not submit themselves unto the righteousness of God (10:3), in spite of the fact that God sought them; "All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people" (10:21).

This theme of righteousness by faith in God and God's Promise and God's Gift of love dominates the whole section of chapters 8-11. The line of thought is that our sovereign God has always entered into human affairs with grace-laden promises, promises that got fulfilled from a grace-loaded God. And it is precisely this aspect of God's biography – that He entered into human affairs with sovereign generosity, with sovereign largess – which Paul is thrilled to recount in chapters 8 and 9:

- no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus (8:11)
- ye have received the Spirit of adoption (8:15)
- we are the children of God and joint-heirs with Christ (8:17)
- all things work together for good! (8:28)
- especially 8:28-39!

And then in 9:4-5 we note what God had given to the people of Israel: the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came!

And though He had done all things well for His people of Promise (vv. 4-5) and His faithfulness to them had not budged an inch, nonetheless Jewry had turned against their Savior-God. How heart-wrenching to see those souls commit suicide! It is not God who is responsible for their defection; they must bear their own blame and guilt.

Throughout our study we need to be wary of a human version of the Sovereignty of God which will obscure God's revelation of Himself as He IS. Though His ways are higher than ours, and only in heaven's light will we comprehend all that He IS, yet He has revealed Himself to us in the Scripture, and we must not allow that revelation to be tarnished by an ever-so-subtle and quasi-Scriptural mindset such as the Calvinist Sovereignty versus grace theory.

We begin our study of Romans 9 at verse 6, which follows upon the doxology to Christ, the Gift of God for His people Israel. What happened to Israel to make it the cause of lamentation amid all the gifts of grace it had received? It had defected from God. Because of what? It would be a normal human response to posit that there had been a flaw somewhere in **God's** handling of the Jews. Or perhaps God's Word was at fault and had "failed" them in some way. Or did God misspeak Himself in making promises to Israel that He never really meant? To this allegation the inspired apostle most decisively objects. Οὐχ οἷον δὲ ὅτι ἐκπέπτωκεν ὁ λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ. "*Not of this sort is it that the Word of God has fallen out.*" It is not proper to deduce that God's Word has stopped being effective, for it is still the power line supplying the energy able to convert hearts and lives.

The rest of verse 6, with verses 7 and 8, carries on a line of argument which intends to clarify another point. The problem is this: How is a person to understand the term "Israel"? Paul has just spoken of his fellow Jews as his "kinsmen according to the flesh; who are Israelites" (v. 4). In other words, Jews can be spoken of as Israelites; both terms refer to the racial grouping descended from Abraham. It there suited Paul's line of thought to include all of them in a generic grouping as those who had received the cornucopia of God's blessings. But then he shifts the definition of "Israelite" (vv. 6ff.), bringing it into sharper focus and a more limited scope. Why is it necessary to move away from the generic Israelite of verse 4 to the more specific Israelite of verse 6? Because it is necessary to show that God has always been more concerned for the inner man than the outer; He rules individual hearts and minds, not corporate Jewry. The problem Paul has been addressing in Romans is the mindset of Jewry which patted itself on the back for being Jewish, thus producing a devaluation of God's largess. What a pity that Paul's countrymen found their spiritual foundation stone in their genetics! It's the old, oft-repeated tragedy: when God blesses mankind, man interprets the transaction to be a gauge of his own importance. Over a span of years and centuries, the Jewish apperception of cause-effect got so warped by the gravitational pull of egocentricity that God's will and ways were no longer interpreted correctly.

It is this spiritual aberration which Paul confronts over and again in Romans, and in following the grand theme of righteousness from God by Jesus Christ through faith, we arrive at the epicyclic juncture of verse 6. The blessings God

had given to Abraham and promised to his descendants were not meant generically, as though being Jewish were the foundation of their relationship to God. The point had to be made that God's interests are with the individual – personal rather than generic – and thus His procedures are gratuitous rather than conditional. This is the reason for the long stream of negatives in verses 6-8. A whole mindset must be dealt with, countered, and discarded. Specifically, the presupposition that anyone having the blood line of Abraham was a child of God (*ipso facto!*) must be exposed as a prime fallacy. God's children are all those and only those who are engendered by God, borne by God, and given life by God, to the exclusion of any and all human input, contrivance, or influence. This is a matter of grace, as it has always been; it is simply the way God operates that He removes a matter of such great importance (salvation!) from being manipulated by humans.

Thus: it is not the case that all of Israel is “Israel” (v. 6);
it is not the case that the “seed” of Abraham are all his children (v. 7);
it is not the case that the children of the flesh are the children of God (v. 8);
and it is not a matter of works (v. 12).

Therefore, in order to avoid getting mixed signals about God's ways of grace, the term “Israel” must not be considered coterminous with “Abraham's children.” For it is not true that all children of Abraham are his “seed” (v. 7), but rather the extent of the term is presented in Genesis 21:12, “In Isaac [only] it shall be called for you ‘seed’.” That is to say, it is not the children of the flesh who are the (spiritual) children of God, but the children of the **promise** are spoken of as “seed.”

This should clear up the confused thinking about whether God had perhaps fallen short somehow by letting so many Jews reject Jesus. The truth is that God had never promised the conversion of the Jewish race *in toto*. He **did** promise His love and grace; **promise** *per se* bespeaks beneficence; and His ways with humans have been governed entirely by such beneficence from the beginning. When He spoke to Abraham He was specific about that: “In Isaac your heirs shall be called your ‘seed’ . . . For promise is this word: ‘According to this [specified] time I shall come and there shall be to Sarah a son’” (Gen. 18:10,14).

Again, we will correctly understand the thrust of this verse only by keeping in touch with the flow of Paul's argument: **God** begets **spiritual** children, people who belong to Him by right of HIS doings, not man's, for as soon as humans get their hands on spiritual matters, they invariably wreak havoc. Only when **God** manages with His salvific power, grace, and love, only then are souls safe indeed.

For this very reason, so as to preserve the Salvation-Plan from human mismanagement, God has always maintained His sovereign prerogatives. Even in this seemingly inconsequential matter of the lineup of the earthly forefathers of the Messiah, even here His method bespeaks grace, for He bypasses human agencies, ignores human limitations, and gloriously overleaps human incapacities.

“Promise”! This word is given prime location in the sentence; it is stressed as the lead thought, for it is **promise** and the beneficent attitude of God's heart behind it that deserves our closest attention. If one may speak of God exercising sovereign power and sovereign love in selecting a line of patriarchs, it is always a sovereignty that is geared to His saving grace in the **promise**. Above all else, and in spite of all that might intrude upon His sovereign Plan to bring the Savior into this wretched world, God held to His love, mercy, grace – and thus to His PROMISE.

This is the thrust of verses 7-19: The Covenant Promise is to be anchored in these representatives: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From one generation to the next, God operated on and by promise, rather than by something limited or restricted, as it would be if the Plan were human-oriented. Such is the nature of His sovereign purposes for the world.

III

We approach the subject of Rebecca's children (vv. 10-13) in the context of the preceding verses; nothing there speaks of any of the children of Abraham being castaway from the Promise; no reference is made to an Esau as one whom God predestined to reprobation, as one would expect if the subject matter here were dealing with the salvation or damnation of individuals. We ought not be led to confuse God's selection of this line of patriarchs with His selection (election) of souls to eternal destinies. In such manner Calvinists have misread the verses before us.

Paul pursues the theme of God's sovereignty by showing that no earthly problems were going to forestall or de-

tour God's Grand Preoccupation – mankind shall have a Savior from Abraham through Sarah, and He shall come from Isaac through Rebecca, and He shall come from Jacob. Thus God exercised godly sovereignty over a series of obstacles that got in the way of His plan, and in each case God's will of grace prevailed. God would not be sovereign Promise-God if He could not overcome the physiological problem of Sarah's menopause, and the sociological problem of primogeniture, and the psychological barrier of parental preference that caused sibling rivalry. To establish this line of Promise-bearers there needed to be choosing and preference, of course. This selectivity also, of course, implies non-selection of alternatives, which brings to human minds the question of God's principle of selection. What prompted God to select Abraham rather than Nahor, and Isaac rather than Ishmael, and Jacob rather than Esau? Or, indeed, why not any other person out of the host of humanity available?

If God chose the Promise-bearers in view of something in them, then the program of salvation would have been flawed from the outset; then God's program would be dependent to a greater or lesser degree upon what is in man. And such a man-conditioned plan would be genetically flawed. Paul is assuring his readers that such a horrendous miscegenation is not God's way. He never has and never will condition His plan upon what is in mankind. To God all glory that even in the choosing of the patriarchs (which may well seem a side issue in the plan of salvation) God has not been less than totally in personal control, exercising His sovereignty in grace-filled Promise-love.

The case of the twins mentioned in verses 11-13 is a further illustration of the principle. This is not a dissertation on God's eternal decree of election of souls to salvation or to reprobation; for that we go to Ephesians 1 and Romans 8. Here in Romans 9 we have the line of thought that a sovereign God is in control of all things so that they serve to implement His Promise-plans for the world.

First we note a sequence of subordinate ideas, including genitive absolutes which set the conditions for the closing declaration of verse 12. First of all, verses 10 and 11: οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ Ῥεβέκκα ἐξ ἐνόσ κοίτην ἔχουσα, Ἰσαὰκ τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν· μήπω γὰρ γεννηθέντων μηδὲ προαξάντων τι ἀγαθὸν ἢ κακόν, ἵνα ἡ κατ' ἐκλογὴν τοῦ Θεοῦ πρόθεσις μένη, οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων, ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦντος, ἐρρέθη αὐτῇ ὅτι ὁ μείζων δουλεύσει τῷ ἐλάσσονι, *“Not only that, but also Rebecca when pregnant by one, Isaac our father – the ones not yet born having done neither good nor evil, in order that the setting-forth by God's choice might stand – it was said to her, ‘The elder shall serve the younger.’”*

The matter of God's sovereignty is located exactly where God puts it; in this instance He exercised His sovereignty to counteract the earthly rule of primogeniture. A Bible student who knows the Old Testament context of Romans 9:12 is not afflicted with the problem which Calvinists have brought upon themselves. For there God was predicting only the earthly future of Jacob and Esau and their earthly relationship to one another. God determined that primogeniture was not going to be the rule of the day for these two, but a reversal of man's customs, precisely and specifically to demonstrate the truth that God takes care of God's saving business in the best way possible. The point Paul is making: no human is allowed to be self-centered when standing in the presence of God's plan of salvation, for everything is of God! From start to finish, God does it all! God is sovereign not only in planning salvation, but also in providing a sovereign implementation, down to the last detail.

We now address the two words – ἐκλογὴ and πρόθεσις – which have led Calvinists to predicate their doctrine of double predestination upon the sovereign will of God. Careful exegesis prevents deducing more from the verse than is in it. We are satisfied with the basic root meanings of ἐκλογὴ and πρόθεσις in this context; simply *calling* and *setting forth*. If Paul were speaking of an ἐκλογὴ that was done in eternity rather than a *calling* done during Rebecca's pregnancy, we might well use the dogmatic term *election*, as the KJV, RSV, and NIV do; yet the context does not direct us back into eternity. The case simply put is that God told Rebecca before the twins were born that the one born first would serve the one born second; then Paul tells us that this choosing was not based on anything either good or bad that either of the two fetuses had done, but rather that the choosing was an internal matter of God's personal and private counsels. Setting Jacob apart (πρόθεσις) was in accord with God's own choice (ἐκλογὴ), and that should stand. This procedure ought to remain (μένει) as the most satisfactory and laudable mechanism for God's will being done on earth in furthering His Grand Preoccupation through a selecting of the generations of the patriarchs.

This passage has no connotations of eternal predestination, not even when we consider verse 13. καθὼς

γέγραπται· τὸν Ἰακώβ ἠγάπησα, τὸν δὲ Ἡσαῦ ἐμίσησα. “As it is written [Mal. 1:2 ff.] *Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.*” Here Paul hearkens back to the days of Malachi, after many generations of descendants of both Jacob and Esau had lived and died. On this earth and for their lives on this earth Jacob and his offspring had received a much greater outpouring of blessings (cf. vv. 4-5) than Esau and his tribe had enjoyed. The context of God’s word through Malachi is one of rebuttal to Jewish complaints **in Malachi’s day** that God had not loved them enough. To which God responded, in effect, “Don’t you know where you have stood ever since Isaac? I could just as well have chosen the other twin son, but I chose you rather than Esau to be special to Me. So I am justifiably angered with you for your despising of My special love for you.”

Again, the choice of this verse from Malachi fits Paul’s whole train of thought: also Paul’s contemporaries had cast themselves away from the Savior; people who had been singularly blessed had lost their blessedness; and that was their fault, not God’s (ch. 10).

As to whether God’s way of doing His work with humans is open to criticism, whether God’s way of showering gratuitous favors on one man or one race may not be a bit arbitrary – and perhaps smacks of unfairness – “*GOD – FORBID!*” (v. 14). We may not totally understand God’s ways with Jacob and Esau; we may not comprehend God’s mind in this matter of selectivity for earthly blessings and honors, but at least we will not presume to attribute to the Infinite God some failure to live by His own standards of righteousness. Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν; μὴ ἀδικία παρὰ τῷ Θεῷ; μὴ γένοιτο. Any attitude of challenge or faultfinding must be squelched in the heart, for God is flawlessly fair in bestowing love and mercy, as Paul so clearly affirms in the next few verses. What God does is **always** predetermined by His quintessential quality of lovingkindness. To imply that He is not that sort of a God is to throw His own assertions back into His face. “– or He said to Moses, *I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*” τῷ γὰρ Μωϋσεῖ λέγει· ἐλεήσω ὃν ἂν ἐλεῶ, καὶ οἰκτιρήσω ὃν ἂν οἰκτίρω.

The citation is from Exodus 33:19, and the situation that called it forth again suits Paul’s thesis. After that horrible defection aided by Aaron and then the execution of the 3,000, Moses in desperation needed reassurance that God had not disinherited him and the people; God gave such reassurance in this word. For in response to Moses’ plea, “*Show me Thy glory,*” Moses was shown that which truly IS the glory of Jehovah: His goodness, His being merciful, His being compassionate. Again we see the fitness of the quotation to Paul’s line of argumentation; God never quits being what He IS, and never stops doing what He has programmed in that compassion. Therefore, if and when souls are lost, let us neither excuse ourselves nor try to shift the responsibility onto God. On the other hand, when souls are reclaimed, the credit is not man’s, but God’s. “*So then it is not [a matter of] him that wills, nor of him that runs [pursues], but [it is entirely and restrictively a matter] of God who shows mercy*” (v. 16). ἄρα οὖν οὐ τοῦ θέλοντος οὐδὲ τοῦ τρέχοντος, ἀλλὰ τοῦ ἐλεοῦντος Θεοῦ.

IV

God shows mercy! This is the guidestar for the following section of verses 19-23. Of all those confrontations which God endured because of His program of grace and mercy, the conflict which Pharaoh of Egypt instigated provides a prime example of how God graciously proceeds on His course of mercy and how He “*breaks and hinders every evil will and counsel that would not let His Name be hallowed . . .*” For it was His **Name**, His **reputation**, which was at stake; so when Pharaoh challenged God’s gracious will for the Israelite nation, God could not and would not capitulate. Indeed, after every plague God allowed Pharaoh to exercise his own will, either to submit or continue the challenge, and each time the self-willed emperor refused to sue for peace.

Whether we take the “*raised thee up*” (ἐξήγειρά σε) to refer to God’s preservation of the king from death in the plagues up to that time, or whether it refers to his ascending the throne during the period in which the Exodus was to take place, God’s purpose was identical, to show forth His (sovereign) power in him. The miracles which God wrought were displays of God’s superiority over sinful man, as well as demonstrations of God’s love for His people. Pharaoh was allowed to maintain his stubborn resistance to the point that the greatest kingdom of the day, once prospered by God as a half-way house for His people, now, because of anti-God sinfulness, lay decimated. What is the apostle proving with this example? That Pharaoh was pre-elected from all eternity unto reprobation? On the contrary, Paul presents the case of Pharaoh versus God’s people as an example of His mercy, on the one hand, and of His use of even those who oppose Him

to bring honor to His Name Jehovah.

How are we to understand verse 18? ἄρα οὖν ὃν θέλει ἐλεεῖ, ὃν δὲ θέλει σκληρύνει. “*So then, whom He wills, He mercies, but whom He wills, He hardens.*” Again, we stay in touch with the context. The “*so then*” (ἄρα οὖν) makes it obvious that Pharaoh’s example is the one which illustrates the truth. When we return to the Exodus account, this matter is brought into clearer focus.

Ten times Exodus reports that Pharaoh hardened himself; then only in consequence of this self-hardening, we read ten times that God hardened this self-hardened man; see Keil, *Genesis and Exodus*, 338, etc. . . . Even the hardening of God’s agency is not complete at once; it follows . . . stages . . . only the last is final and hopeless. . . . not until all the warnings of the gradually closing door are utterly in vain does the door sink regretfully into its lock.⁸

Clearly, the hardening being referred to took place in time, **not** in eternity; it followed upon Pharaoh’s impenitent attitude; God’s act of hardening was a seal placed upon Pharaoh’s own self-chosen acts; thus we are not presented with a case of an eternal decree preceding an earthly human life, but a temporal decree consequent upon that life. In Exodus 4:21 the LORD tells Moses the final outcome: “*I will harden his heart,*” which, of course, God foresaw in divine omniscience, but foreknowledge is not the same as fore-ordination of individuals unto reprobation.

The example of Pharaoh has been provided to give a concrete illustration of the more generalized truth: God controls this earth and He makes all things on earth work out for good unto His people. God has thereby produced a powerful witness unto Himself in the world, “*so that the Name of the LORD might be published abroad in all the earth.*” ὅπως διαγγελῆ τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐν πάσῃ τῇ γῆ. Those who use this illustration of the apostle as basis for their doctrine of double predestination are in conflict with the text itself, as well as with the Scriptures in Ezekiel 33:11; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; John 3:16; Romans 8:30; 2 Corinthians 5:19; etc.

In verses 19-27 we are again brought solidly face to face with the Sovereignty of God. It is a sovereignty that Paul has presented so boldly that someone may be tempted to object, “Well, since it is God who determines everything, and has mercy on whomever He wants to, or hardens whomever He wants to, how can it be my fault that I am as I am? If God in His sovereign omnipotence has made me so, there is no chance that a mere human can successfully ‘break loose’ from that sovereign control.”

This is an understandable objection; yet it is not a valid objection. Human nature being as it is, God has always been challenged since Adam and Eve, challenged for not adapting His purposes, plans, and deeds in a more man-oriented manner so as either to give man more credit for his goodness, or at least less blame for his badness. It is the **attitude** of such a questioning that is wrong. It exposes a sinful presumption of the heart. Paul does not answer the substance of the question; he does not provide a solution for the dilemma of how man IS responsible for his derelictions while at the same time it is God who exercises sovereign control over everyone, but Paul does confront the attitude of the questioner. The heart from which such a challenge arises is out of line; it behooves the mere human to be more circumspect when considering his relationship with the Almighty. “*O human, just who [do you think] you are, you who answer back to God [like that]?”* (v. 20).

The backdrop for the following illustration of the potter and the lump of clay in verses 20-21 is actually the history of Jewry. We are headed for verses 22-29, and the subject under discussion is still God’s creation of a people unto Himself, a people composed, however, of both Jew **and** Gentile: a people not merely descended from Abraham, but belonging to the “*seed*” of Abraham, whether they be Jewish or Gentile. This was a most difficult concept for even the converted Jew to assimilate. Perhaps it is a Jewish upstart who presumes to judge God; he is in no better position to speak back than is a lump of clay in the potter’s hand. The illustration is meant to reveal the incongruity of a human challenging his Creator on anything. For the potter certainly has the right by virtue of being the potter to make up his own mind about the function of the next lump of clay he puts onto the wheel. He may have need of one that will function for esthetic purposes or he may need one to function as a kitchen bowl. We note at the same time that neither of the two lumps of clay was made for the purpose of being smashed. Neither one was made so as to be the opposite of a functioning vessel. This is sovereignty, of course, but a sovereignty that produces something useful. These are worthwhile vessels in keeping with the purpose of their creator; and, in the case of God, being Creator is never at odds – either in purpose or in fulfillment – with being Redeemer.

And now the point of the little parable of the clay lump and the potter: “*What if God, [though normally] intending to show His wrath and to make known His power, endured in great forbearance the vessels of wrath outfitted unto destruction . . . ?*” εἰ δὲ θέλων ὁ Θεὸς ἐνδείξασθαι τὴν ὀργὴν καὶ γνωρίσαι τὸ δυνατόν αὐτοῦ ἤνεγκε ἐν πολλῇ μακροθυμίᾳ σκεύη ὀργῆς κατηρτισμένα εἰς ἀπώλειαν.

The construction of these verses is somewhat complex; we begin with a participial modifying clause that appears from the context to be concessive, then on to the main verb (ἤνεγκε) and the object (σκεύη). Obviously God put up with something which did not deserve such for-bearance; this “something” cannot be of His own doing, for it can hardly be conceived of that God bears with much long-suffering something He Himself has authored; He then would be in conflict with Himself. Humans, indeed, because of their fleshly frailties have to put up with their own shortcomings, but God has no area in His Being or in His Deeds that is worthy of wrath, which He then endures with as much self-control as He can manage.

They are vessels of God’s wrath, and a forbearance less wonderful than God’s would have much earlier done away with them as pestilential vermin. Who, then, is the author of their being (σκεύη ὀργῆς κατηρτισμένα εἰς ἀπώλειαν)? Not God, for He has actually been working in the opposite direction; and if God is not the one who has so equipped them, then it is either Satan or the vessels themselves who have done so. Satan is the primary agent, but sinful men are the secondary agents. Both have worked it out so that many human lives and souls have become receivers of God’s wrath, outfitted as they have made themselves to their own destruction.

In this case, God’s sovereignty most clearly has been shaped and implemented in gracious lovingkindness. Though He has every right to burst forth in divine wrath and irresistible power, He has nonetheless been extraordinarily patient in putting up with slander, defamation, and rejection also from the Jews of Paul’s day. Why does God endure this ill treatment? Because He has a higher purpose, one that is suited to His intrinsic nature as the God of grace: “*even in order to make known the riches of His glory upon the vessels of mercy, which He has prepared in advance unto glory.*”

Expressing power is great, and so is revealing wrath, but outshining these and exercising control over them until a day of judgment (cf. Matt. 24) yet to come is the most wonderful of all of God’s attributes: the GLORY of His never-ending mercy as enjoyed by the vessels of mercy, those whom He has in advance prepared unto glory both in this world and the world to come. As the vessels of wrath are being borne with patiently, providing them also with a time of grace, they may well be brought to see what they are missing as they behold the outpouring of God’s mercies onto their Christian neighbors.

We do not hesitate to see in προητοίμασεν an allusion to eternal election. For here the verb is an aorist active, with God as the subject. This is in contrast to the participle κατηρτισμένα, modifying the vessels of wrath. The vessels of wrath are not presented as those whom **God** has outfitted unto destruction; they are simply described **as** such. Only the exegete of Calvinist persuasion will view this verse as a presentation of double predestination, thereby making God the agent responsible for their being outfitted unto destruction.

[We note that Lenski seems to overbalance here, perhaps in fear that if he grants a foreordination in the aorist finite verb, he will be stuck with foreordination in the perfect participle as well. Thus in order to avoid the second, he sacrifices the first.]

Now we arrive at verse 24, the culmination of Paul’s portrait of God in His true sovereignty. It is a sovereignty of gracious intent to call and save souls. “*Whom also he called – even us – not only out of Jews but also out of Gentiles.*” It is a sovereignty that will let nothing stand in the way of His mercy; it is a sovereignty that occupies itself with the Promise and the Savior of Promise; it is a sovereignty which pre-empts both His wrath and His power in deference to His magnanimity; it is a sovereignty that rescues both Jews and Gentiles from their sins and the consequences and places them in the company of the saints.

The citation from Hosea (vv. 25-26) reiterates the point that God calls – effectively and unto glory – people whom the Jews had considered NOT to be included in God’s love; the passages from Isaiah (vv. 27-28) strengthen two points

already made: the first, that although not all the children of Abraham are the elect, yet God has His remnant; and secondly, that this remnant has been spared from the wrath they deserved just as fully as Sodom and Gomorrah deserved. Indeed, “*many are called, but few are chosen.*” How can this be? Because God in gracious love, desiring to save from self-incurred destruction, salvages the few by bringing them to Christ.

This is not a sovereignty that is exercised in an arbitrary selection of some souls unto salvation with its concomitant selection of others unto perdition; Romans 9 presents God’s sovereignty as a modifier and a qualifier of that quality in Him which predominates in all His wondrous works and ways: His mercy and compassion – first, last, and always. He Himself has given us the proper view of His personality in the revelation He bestowed upon Moses in Exodus 34:6-7: “. . . and the Lord . . . proclaimed the name of the LORD. . . the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin . . .”

Oh, give thanks unto the LORD,
for He is **good**,
and His **mercy** endureth forever!

Notes

1. Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951) 15.
2. Boettner 20.
3. Boettner 24.
4. Boettner 96.
5. Boettner 104.
6. Boettner 105.
7. Boettner 117.
8. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1945) 617.

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THE RELATIONSHIP OF GENERAL (OBJECTIVE) JUSTIFICATION
TO PERSONAL (SUBJECTIVE) JUSTIFICATION*

[*Quartalschrift*, October, 1910. Translation by H. Witt.]

Herman Gieschen

A person is justified through faith (Rom. 3:28). That is subjective (personal) justification. God through Christ has justified **all** people (Rom. 5:18). That is objective (general) justification. How does the latter relate to the former?

When one attempts to determine the relationship of two truths of faith (articles of faith) then there arises the danger of departing from Scripture. The scriptural principle is denied when one attempts to **establish** a relationship instead of simply presenting a scripturally established relationship. It is best to accept the two truths as Scripture presents them and also to know or say no more nor less than what Scripture declares regarding the relationship. Our reason may not be satisfied; the two teachings may seem to be contradictory; but when one then seeks to lend a helping hand for the sake of clarification, the result will be either a detraction of both doctrines or surely a detraction of one or the other. Of course, one is then happy that now everything makes sense even as $2 \times 2 = 4$, **but** one does not realize that one has sinned against Scripture (Rev. 22:18-19), nor that one has vitiated the Gospel.

When one attempts to determine the relationship of general (objective) to personal (subjective) justification, one usually makes the mistake that one will not permit the general (objective) justification to be a **true or real justification**. Many say that if one wants to speak of a general (objective) justification, that this can be no more than rendering a **possibility** of the justification of all people on the part of God. One surmises then that God has through Christ reconciled the world to Himself and now is and declares Himself **ready** to absolve and accept any person **IF ONLY** he will believe in Christ; a proper (true) absolution, proper justification on the part of God, however, first then takes place when a person **ON HIS PART** accepts the atonement of Christ. In such an instance there will be no difficulty in determining the relationship of general to personal justification.

However, according to Scripture, both the general (objective) and the personal (subjective) are real, actual justifications. When God justifies a believer, then He absolves him of all sin and awards him life. It is just this that God does for all people in the general (objective) justification. The Scripture **speaks** of a justification for **all** people (Rom. 5:18). It also distinctly reveals here that it places δικαίωσις over against κατάκριμα, which through Adam's fall came upon **all** men. In this connection the apostle raises the point that through Adam's transgression (offense) judgment came upon **ALL** men to condemnation: Adam's sin is everybody's sin (πάντες ἥμαρτον, v. 12), *i.e.*, through the disobedience of one the many are presented as sinners (v. 19); death through the sin of one has come upon **all** people (v. 12); the many died through the offense of one (v. 15); through the transgression of one death ruled, even before the giving of the Law (v. 17); because of one the judgment came to damnation (v. 16). The one with his offense stands over against the other one with His (δικαίωμα) justification, His (ὑπακοή) obedience; Christ's righteousness redounded to the justification of **ALL** (v. 18).

It is clear that a justification in its truest sense is meant here. The apostle demonstrates that through Christ a superabundant abrogation of all consequences of Adam's sin has come to pass. That is now a περισσεία (abundance) of χάρις τοῦ Θεοῦ (the grace of God) **AND THE** δωρεὰ ἐν χάριτι τῇ τοῦ ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς τοὺς πολλοὺς (to many, v. 15); there is a free gift of many offenses to justification (v. 16); there is a gift of righteousness which the believers accept (v. 17); through the obedience of one (as an assured result future: κατασταθήσονται) the many are presented as justified (v. 19). Nor does the apostle let the matter rest by saying (εἰς δικαίωσιν) it has come, but says ζωῆς, to a justification that is ordained unto **life** (v. 18). Yes, truly, the apostle is here speaking of a real absolution, of complete pardon, a declaration of righteousness, a reception of life. But all emphasis of the chapter is placed on the δι' ἐνὸς πάντας—through **ONE** upon **ALL**. As through one (Adam) sinfulness, death, damnation upon **ALL**, so, yes, in still fuller measure, πολλῶ μᾶλλον (v. 15), grace, declaration of righteousness, righteousness unto life, to eternal life through **ONE** (Christ) upon **ALL**; and as the one **has come to pass**, so also has the other one. Paul's intention here is not to show what the sin of Adam caused, what according to God's purpose should come to pass by virtue of Christ's obedience, but what **resulted** from the one's doing as well as the other's. The immediate, blessed **result** of the obedience of Jesus is compared

with the immediate, terrible **result** of Adam's sin and is contrasted in the superabundance of them. Even though the verb is missing in the second part of verse 18, the connection would cause one to agree with Luther that the future (κατασταθήσονται, v. 19) does not speak against it, but much in favor of it. As now through one's sin damnation has come upon all people, so also through one's righteousness the justification unto life has come upon all mankind. The same truth is expressed in other scriptures. In Romans 1:17, Paul says: δικαιοσύνη ἐν αὐτῷ (in the Gospel) ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν. Similarly, Romans 3:21. If righteousness before God is revealed to man in the Gospel, it must be at hand prior to that revelation. If God reveals to man a righteousness that avails before Him, *i.e.*, a righteousness which is to be believed, then He must have declared them righteous beforehand, and thus now justifies them with righteousness already at hand. **And is that** the truth, namely, that Christ has redeemed mankind, purchased it and reconciled it to God? What else does that mean than that man is now free, loosed, and sins are done away, covered, forgiven? If it is truth that the salutary grace has abounded to all men so that we may proclaim the Gospel to all creatures, yes, what else does that say than that the sin problem is settled between God and man, that God has put man's sin behind His back and no longer gives it any thought? And what else does that mean than that God has declared man justified and justifies fully and completely? For the Apostle Paul these are not empty words, but truth; therefore he says (2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 1:7; Rom. 5:9): δικαιωθέντες σωθησόμεθα and puts in verse 10 these words which mean the same: καταλλαγέντες σωθησόμεθα.

If someone wants to challenge the expression "general (or objective) justification," then he has to contend with Romans 5:18. Of course, it does not depend on the expression, but on the content involved. **If** one preaches correctly regarding redemption, the satisfaction of Christ's atonement (reconciliation); **if** one preaches the Gospel rightly at all; **then** he always preaches objective or general justification. Why does one so battle against the teaching of general (objective) justification? Oftentimes the cause is to be found in synergistic leanings. Most often, however, it is with the idea of having all doctrines of Scripture in fine agreement with each other. The teachings of general (objective) and personal (subjective) justification do not seem to be in harmony with each other; so one seeks to produce a harmony. The error lies here that one does not really know, nor rightly understand what **Gospel is**. He deals with the Gospel as if it were a directive, a rule, which teaches how **one might be saved**. In such an instance everything must be plain and simple for the mind, for the understanding; but directive and rule are LAW. Gospel is the offering, the tendering, the giving of the grace of God. The Gospel does not intend to reveal **how** one might be saved, but **gives, brings, and bestows** salvation with all that is connected with it. The Gospel does not want to teach that **one must believe in order to be saved**, but it wants to **create the faith** through which one is saved. If one cannot understand how general (objective) justification agrees in everything with all that belongs to personal (subjective) justification (how everything agrees in the final analysis), that does not trouble faith at all, for faith rests on the Gospel, on taking hold of the grace of God in Christ Jesus; the forgiveness of sins is acquired through Christ. Let us not be afraid of the doctrine of general (objective) justification. **Where there is no general (objective) justification, there we will find no Gospel**. Let us always and ever preach general (objective) justification. No one come to personal (subjective) justification except through the truth of general (objective) justification!

It is the clear teaching of Scripture that God has truly justified all mankind. In defining the relationship of general (objective) to personal (subjective) justification we must be careful that we do not do an injustice to general (objective) justification.

Just as surely as Scripture teaches general (objective) justification, just as plainly does it also teach that one is first justified before God through faith. In Romans the Apostle Paul clearly states that Gentile and Jew, all mankind, lie under the wrath and curse of God, but that one is justified through faith. In one and the same letter he states that justification to life has come upon all people (Rom. 5:18), and God's wrath from heaven will be revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). Peter says (1 Pet. 2:10) of the believers: οἱ οὐκ ἠλεημένοι, νῦν δὲ ἐλεηθέντες ("which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy"). John says, "He who believes not the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God will abide upon him" (ἡ ὀργὴ μένει ἐπ' αὐτόν, John 3:36). Christ says, "He who believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16). The publican in the temple went to his home justified rather than the pharisee, *i.e.*, the publican justified, the pharisee not. The question: "How is a man justified?" is often briefly answered: "through faith." See Romans 3:28; Acts 13:39: ἐν τούτῳ πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων δικαιούται.

Accordingly, faith is of utmost importance in justification. Without faith man is damned. Through faith he is just and righteous before God. With faith comes to pass the great change. Therefore, the aim of all our sermons and teachings, all our pastoral work, is to create, maintain and increase faith in those entrusted to our care. Therefore we have only earnest words for such who are satisfied with only a make-believe faith.

We who teach the general (objective) justification according to Scripture are often unjustly accused that we do an injustice to personal (subjective) justification, the justification through faith. If that were true, then we would not have to here waste time and words in considering the relationship of general to personal justification. It is clear that in determining the relationship of the general to the personal justification, if we do an injustice to the personal, then we repudiate

Scripture. Justification by faith is just as valid as general (objective) justification.

The teaching of Scripture on justification through faith now rightly shows the relationship of general (objective) to personal (subjective) justification. The Scripture says a man is justified by faith, πίστει (Rom. 3:28); through faith, διὰ πίστεως (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:30); by faith or as a result of faith, ἐκ πίστεως; the believers are justified (Acts 13:39); God justifies him who believes in Jesus, τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ (Rom. 3:26). Believing, faith, is counted for righteousness (Rom. 4:3.5.9). The righteousness of a believer is called the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:11). The righteousness which avails before God is indicated as δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ ἐκ πίστεως or as διὰ πίστεως (Rom. 1:17; 3:22). We ask: How should we understand the assertions regarding faith in connection with justification? Newer theologians point toward this that faith is made into a *causa* and indeed *causa meritoria* of justification. They say faith, confidence, is the basic or fundamental quality or virtue. When a sinner believes (trusts) in God, then he basically stands in right relationship to God. God takes note of that (believing). Therefore God justifies the believer. **THIS SCRIPTURE EMPHATICALLY REJECTS.** The **virtue** of faith (trusting) **belongs in the category of works, works of Law.** Law does not only deal with external works, but above all with the intention of the heart and thoughts. It is spiritual. How often does not Scripture place “not of works” next to “through faith,” *i.e.*, Romans 3:28; 4:6. In justification **the Law has nothing to say and seek.**

“But now the righteousness of God **without the Law** is manifested” (Rom. 3:21). “For Christ is the end of the Law . . . to everyone that believeth” (Rom. 10:4). Furthermore, the assertion “through faith” sides with “by grace” of Romans 3:22.24; Ephesians 2:8. That which is ours through Christ in opposition to that of Adam is, according to Romans 5, grace, gift of grace, gift, free gift.

Hence, in justification faith cannot play a role as virtue, or work of Law; that would then **exclude** grace, for, according to Scripture, grace and works nullify each other, even as grace and works (merit) exclude each other (Rom. 11:6). So then the Scripture expressly says that “by faith” contains the concept “through grace” in itself. “Therefore it is of faith that it might be by grace” (Rom. 4:16). Even in the expression “by faith” there also is given evidence of this: not **because of the virtue of faith.** Finally, the Scripture often declares that we are righteous through Christ (Gal. 2:24), without faith being mentioned (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30; Acts 15:9, and 1 John 1:17). Yes, Scripture places the expressions “to be righteous,” “through faith,” and “by faith” as identical with “righteous through Christ” (Gal. 2:16.17). Thus it stands immovable (steadfastly sure) that God does not view faith as a virtue, as the beginning of the right relationship to Him, of the new obedience toward Him, of the new life, as anything good in itself [re faith - H. W.] that He for that reason justifies the believers. Who **THUS** describes faith in the least instance is not preaching **GOSPEL**, but is sitting in the **Law**.

Now others say: One must make a distinction: indeed faith earns nothing, **BUT** it is still instrumental in God justifying the believer. God permits Christ, the redemption, the reconciliation through Christ to be preached, and says: He who believe this, **that** person is righteous. If only one believes in Jesus, he thereby brings it to pass that God justifies him. Hence, through the fulfilling of one of the God-given conditions, namely, the condition of faith in Christ, a person is justified. That, one indicates, is what Paul means to say with the expressions: by means of faith, through faith, as a result of faith man becomes righteous, faith is counted to righteousness, etc. According to **that** the Gospel **then** is preached **IN THIS WAY:** Christ has redeemed you and reconciled you to God, **BUT** you must believe this, otherwise there is no forgiveness for you; **IF, IF, IF** you believe, then surely your sins will be forgiven. If this is correct, what happens to general (objective) justification? Then again it is not true that God has truly justified all people and that in the Gospel full and complete forgiveness, full and complete justification is declared to all people. If the foregoing is not an empty word, then it cannot be that only because of my faith God justifies me; then God has justified me as well as all the world **BEFORE** faith. If it is because of my faith God justifies me, where can I find certainty of my justification? I must look for judgment of my justification **alone in God’s Word.** Then God’s Word no longer gives me that which is most important to me. If it is because of my faith that God justifies me, then I shall be able to satisfy myself **if and when** I assure myself that I have the right faith. But how can it be when Satan denies that I have faith and I cannot overcome the temptation, though yet I still believe? The Gospel of forgiveness of sin could help me, **BUT** that must be tied to the condition of faith, and this is then my trouble, that I do not believe that I believe. Oh, how dangerous it is—the teaching that faith accomplishes a person’s justification. Neither does the distinction apply that faith, indeed, earns nothing in justification, **BUT** it effects, it nevertheless prevails upon God to justify a person. That which here effects something comes in the Scripture under the heading of merited works. Where I do effect, contribute, or do something to my coming into the state of justification, then it is no longer grace, of grace. Is or does my justification come to pass by grace, then it must come to pass without my **doing anything**, anything at all. One should not here insert: My faith, of course, is not my doing, but a gift of God’s grace. For **THEN** the queer thought would emerge that God would **FIRST** have to move Himself through a gift of grace in order to give a **SECOND.** And **THAT** is not what one wishes to say in arguing against the general (objective) justification. Such an argument will not gain anything for the intention that one has. And should the gracious gift of my faith first move God to justify me, then I would have the gracious gift of faith from God **before** I am justified before Him, **while** I lie under His wrath.

Close attention to Paul's words clearly reveals what he means when he speaks of faith in the discussion of justification. One must, first of all, pay attention to the intention of Paul at this point. The main question with him is **not**: How does God go about justifying the individual? He is not concerned with satisfying the curiosity that merely wants to know **how** everything is carried on in God's chamber of justice, in the heart of the Judge, **when** God justifies an individual. He is not making puzzling explanations. No, he here is eminently practical. This is here the question: How does a person on his part become righteous before God, *i.e.*, how does he find absolution where the Law damns all, Jew and Gentile? How does he find acceptance with God? As far as is necessary, God permits a sinner to look into the justice chamber, into the heart of the Judge. God emphasizes grace and says that God, in justifying, is only moved by grace. **Thereby** disappears the terrible thought that the sinner must rely on some kind of merit or worthiness of his. He emphasizes the fully valid redemption. **Thereby** disappears the terrible thought that God's holiness stands in the way of His grace. This is all explained in the interest of the question: How is a man on his part justified before God? How does he find absolution? And in the interest of this question, the apostle answers: By means **of** faith, **by** faith, and **through** faith one is justified, or also: faith is accounted to him as righteousness, etc. He who now knows what faith is according to Scripture, namely, that faith is nothing else than a taking, a taking up, he knows that Paul here, with his assertions regarding faith, wants to give the answer to the question of a sinner: How can I be justified before God? Only believe, only accept the Gospel that God in grace, for Christ's sake, justifies the sinners; let it apply to you and you are righteous before God; you have found absolution; you have acceptance with God. Because that is his meaning, therefore, he can express himself so freely:

πίστει;
 διὰ πίστεως;
 ἐκ πίστεως ἄνθρωπος δικαιοῦται;
 ὁ Θεὸς δικαίον τὸν ἐκ πίστεως;
 ἡ πίστις λογιζέται εἰς δικαιοσύνην;
 δικαιοσύνη πίστεως;
 διὰ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν;
 παντὰς καὶ ἐπὶ παντὰς τοὺς πιστευόντας.

Just this variety and diversity of expressions clearly reveals that with the apostle, when considering justification, faith is merely the organ that receives.

The above becomes more certain through another observation. According to Paul's express words, what is it that justifying faith grasps? It is frequently said: Faith grasps Christ or reconciliation which has come to pass through Christ; therewith (faith) he appears before the presence of God; and thereupon then first follows justification on the part of God. But even as Paul places Christ and atonement as the object of justifying faith, so he also does regarding justification. In Scripture justification is included in the atonement of Christ, which faith seizes. Paul says (Rom. 1:16.17) that the righteousness which avails before God is revealed in the Gospel and describes it not only as ἐκ πίστεως, but also as εἰς πίστιν. The Gospel reveals the righteousness that avails before God so that it is believed. According to Romans 4:5, that person is justified who believes ἐπὶ τὸν δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἀσεβῆ (on Him that justifieth the ungodly). The justified believes that God is the One who declares the ungodly righteous; faith seizes the general (objective) justification. In Romans 5:17 those who obtain salvation are designated as οἱ τὴν περισσείαν τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς δικαιοσύνης λαμβάνοντες (they which receive abundance of the gift of righteousness). In Ephesians 1:7 it is said of Christ: "In Whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sin." In and with the atonement of Christ, which we have in faith, we also have the forgiveness of sin; he who in faith has redemption therewith seizes forgiveness of his sin, justification.

So it is like this: For Christ's sake God has justified all people. That is what God declares in the Gospel. Thus God's judgment issues continually to all people. Therefore the Gospel is gospel. Faith seizes the Gospel. Thus the believer possesses the righteousness that avails before God, and God considers him as one who in faith possesses the righteousness that avails before Him; God considers him His child. But he who believes not, He rejects, abrogates, and makes null (ἀθέτει, Luke 7:30) God's counsel over against himself, and God's wrath remains upon him. So we believe and are saved. So we preach and thus make people blessed. Thus God has commanded us to believe and to preach. That which seems to us to be absurd and preposterous we may confidently leave to God.

THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

Paul F. Nolting

I. Prophetic Perspective

It was Tuesday afternoon of that week that has become so special for New Testament believers – Holy Week. Our Lord had brought His prophetic ministry to a close in the temple. He had passed over the Kidron and was seated on the Mount of Olives with a panoramic view of the temple and city of Jerusalem before Him. In response to a question from His disciples our Lord spoke prophetically of the future of His disciples and His Kingdom and of His chosen people and their temple and city. His discourse was not an isolated excursus on His Kingdom and its relationship to Israel. It was rather the climax of a centuries-long stream of prophetic utterances on the same subject. The core of the message was always the same – the Lord's faithfulness in the midst of His unfaithful people and so mercy in the midst of judgment. The theme of all prophecy is the same – salvation/judgment!

As Jesus was leaving the temple with His disciples, they seized the opportunity to point out to the Lord the grandeur of the temple with its massive masonry. The picture before their eyes was one of national pride; it likewise had spiritual significance, for the disciples associated the coming of the Kingdom that their Teacher had been talking about for some three years with the temple. What a shock when Jesus responded to their enthusiasm with words of imminent judgment: "Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Matt. 24:2). That brief announcement of judgment stimulated the disciples to make further inquiries. Jesus responded with the Olivet Discourse in which He updated the ancient prophetic theme of mercy amidst judgment, the history of His Kingdom as it would come into being in the midst of judgment upon His chosen people Israel.

Jesus spoke to His disciples as their Shepherd. He warned them against being deceived. He spoke of persecutions to come and how they should react. He gave them the sign they asked for, the abomination of desolation, which should be the signal for fleeing from the condemned city. He spoke of the horror of those days when the long-foretold judgment would fall upon His people. So far the judgment theme dominated His discourse, but where was the mercy? How would His Kingdom fare amidst this cataclysm of judgment? What of Israel?

Jesus continued by speaking of that which would occur "immediately after the tribulation of those days" (Matt. 24:29). There would appear the sign that the Son of man, who that same week would be denied and condemned by His own people and turned over to the Romans to be crucified, was not dead and gone but in heaven taking vengeance upon His people who had rejected Him. But more – this despised but glorified Son of man would be sending His angels to gather the elect from one end of heaven to another. Our Lord was not speaking of something that would occur at the end of time, the unknown day and hour when He would come again. No, He was speaking of a movement that would begin immediately after judgment had laid low the temple, the city, and the people of Israel. To make His point Jesus taught the parable of the fig tree, not only the fig tree but all trees, as Luke adds (21:29). What is the lesson to be learned? It's simple; we witness it every spring.

When the branch ends begin to swell and the leaves begin to break forth, we know that summer is around the corner. Summer is the time of growth and development; harvest is the scriptural picture of the end of this aeon. Jesus applied the parable to the subject at hand, "so you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near, at the very doors" (Matt. 24:33). The problem is: What is the subject of the copula "is"? The KJV, NKJV, and NIV supply the neuter pronoun "it" as subject with "He" in the footnote as an alternate suggestion. The "He" would refer back to the Son of man. Phillips, RSV, and the Jerusalem Bible make "He" the subject. Other translations attempt to identify the "it." The Living Bible suggests "my return" with "He" as alternate. Today's English Version translates "the time is near, ready to begin." The New English Bible translates "the end is near." Good News goes along the same line, "In the same way, when you see all these things, you will know that the time is near, ready to begin." The parable of the fig tree and all the trees was to impress upon the disciples that something was to begin. But what? "It," "He," "the time," "the end." The old, but ever reliable hermeneutical rule is that Scripture should be allowed to interpret Scripture. Why not? Luke, who dispelled the notion that "the fig tree" refers to the nation of Israel with his additions of "and all the trees," reveals that the subject of the copula is "the Kingdom of God": "So you, likewise, when you see these things happening, know that the Kingdom of God is near." Previously Jesus had said, "Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near." The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, which the disciples firmly believed to be catastrophic both for Israel and the Kingdom, would be converted into summertime for their redemption and the Kingdom of their Lord! What a divine twist in human events! Mercy amidst judgment! All that would happen before the contemporaneous generation would pass away. That the Lord assured His disciples. This prophetic discourse was actually nothing new; it was rather the climax of centuries of prophecy, each of which had the same message for the contemporaries of the prophet speaking.

JAHVE/Moses

The covenant that the Lord God made with Abraham and reaffirmed with Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18; 17:1-8; 22:15-18; 26:2-5; 28:13-14; 35:11-12) contained three features – descendants, land, and the Messiah. Jahve made (literally cut) the covenant with Abraham and reaffirmed it with Isaac and Jacob. The cutting of the covenant was by its very nature a unilateral action. Jahve appeared to Abraham (Gen. 15); Abraham did, indeed, kill and cut the animals and birds, but Jahve passed between the halves in the form of "a smoking oven and a burning torch" (15:17). "On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram." The action was unilateral; Jahve made the covenant; Abraham was the beneficiary of the covenant. What the Lord God binds Himself to do, He carries out, "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). Since the covenant was unilateral, it was of necessity also unconditional according to the principle of the monergism of grace, for "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion" (Rom. 9:15; Exod. 33:19). The beneficiary of the covenant was originally Abraham and his seed – a collective singular! The Apostle Paul made a point of that in writing to the Galatians: "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). Abraham's seed was promised to be as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore (Gen. 22:17). But not all of Abraham's seed were beneficiaries, for the Seed of Abraham was Christ, the One through whom all families of the earth should be blessed, as Jahve put it when He first revealed His covenant to Abraham (Gen. 12:3), and who became incarnate in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth. Who the true seed of Abraham was in each generation, and so the beneficiaries of the covenant, became evident by their response to the covenant, and so their relationship to Jesus the Christ.

That Jahve made clear when the Abrahamitic covenant took the form of the Sinaitic covenant after the Lord had begun to fulfill His promise of making the descendants of Abraham as the stars of the heavens. The covenant was made anew with the nation of Israel (Exod. 19:24), was promptly broken by Israel (Exod. 32), and then renewed by Jahve (Exod. 33). When the Lord made the covenant with Israel, He promised to send His Angel before them, but most solemnly warned them, negatively and positively, to remain loyal to Him and under no circumstance to worship other gods (Exod. 23:20-31). After the golden calf episode by which Israel broke the covenant, when Jahve again renewed the covenant, He again laid on them their responsibilities (Exod. 34:10-26).

The general conclusion of the book of Leviticus (ch. 26), after the brief introduction (vv. 1-2), contains a section on blessings promised to those who keep the covenant (vv. 3-13), followed by a much longer section on curses that shall befall those who break the covenant (vv. 14-33), and concluded with a section on the Lord's sincere promise of faithfulness to His covenant despite their unfaithfulness (vv. 34-45). The theme of promised mercy in the midst of threatened judgment shines forth.

The same theme is presented much more elaborately by Moses in his final oration to Israel as they were about to enter the promised land (Deut. 28-32). Moses, who knew his people to be a "stiff-necked people" (Exod. 34:9), prophetically laid out the future history of his people down to and including the destruction of the temple and nation by the Romans (Deut. 28:49-68) – to this very day. Yet there was a note of hope (Deut. 30:1-6); Jahve would not abandon His people. He would remain faithful to His covenant. But who would be the beneficiaries? The seed that was "in Christ." Who would one day be included in that seed Moses already indicates in the closing lines of his Song: "Rejoice O Gentiles, with His people" (Deut. 32:43; Rom. 15:10). Jahve remained ever faithful to His covenant; many in Israel became "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears" (Acts 7:15; cf. Exod. 32:9; 33:3; Lev. 26:41) and lost the blessing. A minority in Israel, together with Gentiles, became "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) – the beneficiaries of the covenant.

JAHVE/Solomon

In the course of time the Sinaitic Covenant evolved into the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17). It was during the reign of David that the promise of the land was realized, for when Solomon dedicated the temple all Israel gathered "from the entrance of Hamath to the Brook of Egypt" (1 Kings 8:65; cf. Gen. 15:18). David had lifted the nation of Israel to its zenith; Solomon had built the temple where the Lord was pleased to dwell among His people. The KINGDOM was at its glory-point in Israel. From there on the downhill slide began. When He appeared a second time to Solomon, Jahve again laid it out for Solomon and his people, as He had through Moses at the beginning: "Now if you walk before Me as your father David walked . . . then I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever . . . But if you or your sons at all turn from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have

set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them; and this house which I have sanctified for My name I will cast out of My sight. Israel will be a proverb and a by-word among all peoples" (1 Kings 9:1-9; 2 Chron. 7:12-22). Blessing/curse; Israel's unfaithfulness/Jahve's faithfulness! The covenant would be kept, but who the beneficiaries of that covenant would be would depend upon their response to that covenant, that is, their response of the Mediator of the covenant – Jesus.

JAHVE/Isaiah

Isaiah was called to be a spokesman of the Lord in the second half of the eighth century when Assyria was the dominant world power with Babylon coming into prophetic perspective. The first section of Isaiah's book (ch. 1-6) contains glorious reassurances of Jahve's determination to remain faithful to His covenant. "The mountain of the Lord's House" would be established in the latter days (2:2-4) and "the Branch of the Lord" would surely sprout (4:2; 11:1). But there is an ominous note amidst these promises. Isaiah wrote of total destruction for the nation with the exception of "a very small remnant" (1:9). When he foretold the sprouting of "the Branch," he limited the concomitant blessings to "those of Israel who have escaped" and to those who are "left in Zion" and "remain in Jerusalem" (4:2-3). Chapter five brings the inauspicious song of the Beloved regarding His Vineyard (1-7).

Then comes the amazing call of the prophet who is called the "evangelist of the Old Testament." After seeing "the Lord sitting on a throne," who is identified as Jesus in His glory (John 12:41), Isaiah is commissioned to preach Christ as "the aroma of death to death" (2 Cor. 2:16) for his people. The words of the commission are awesome in their holy majesty: "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on hearing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed." And when the prophet asked, "Lord, how long?" he was told until the country was completely destroyed. But again there was mercy amidst national judgment, for there would remain "a tenth," the "stump," which is "the holy seed" (Isa. 6:13).

Instructive, indeed, is this passage as it is used by our Lord and his apostles, John and Paul. When the Jewish religious establishment began to get their opposition to Jesus organized, Jesus changed His style of teaching. It was then that He began teaching His disciples Kingdom truths in parables. That change in methodology Jesus declared to be a fulfillment of the words of Isaiah upon the nation of Israel. All three synoptists record that fulfillment (Matt. 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10). It was at the end of His public ministry, Monday of Holy Week, that Greeks who had come to the Passover feast sought Him out. Thereafter a voice from heaven responded to our Lord's prayer, "Father, glorify Your name." The Apostle John commented on these occurrences, again invoking the words of Isaiah both in chapter 53 and at his calling, which were being fulfilled. John adds the comment that Israel could not believe because they had brought upon themselves the judgment of hardening (John 12, esp. vv. 38 and 40). When Israel fell under the judgment of hardening, Gentiles are found seeking an audience with Jesus. The sacred book of Acts records the growing of the Word; it spread from Jew to Gentile, from Jerusalem to Rome. When Paul arrived in chains in Rome, he called the leaders of the Jews to the place of his imprisonment and proclaimed unto them the Kingdom of God. After they left without agreeing among themselves that Jesus was the "telos" (end, goal) of both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, the apostle proclaimed the outcome to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's commission to his people. He also declared the rejection of the salvation of God by the Jews to be the divine signal for the transference of that same salvation to the Gentiles, thereby manifesting that the Kingdom was being taken away from the nation of the Jews and given to the Gentiles (Acts 28:17-31). The warnings given to the nation of Israel when Jahve made the covenant with them at Sinai, which warnings were repeated by Moses, Solomon, Isaiah, as well as by all the prophets, went unheeded. The nation of Israel, except for the Remnant, forfeited the Kingdom which passed over to the Gentiles.

JAHVE/JESUS

At His birth Gentile wise men came from the East to worship Him, while all Jerusalem was troubled and no one went to Bethlehem to check out the story (Matt. 2:1-12). "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). He testified to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well that "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22), and He reminded the Gentile woman of Canaan, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). But later He also testified in prophetic manner, "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold [that is, of the House of Israel]; them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). Gentiles were to be gathered; so Jesus continued the judgment/salvation theme of the prophets.

That theme grew more and more intense with judgment looming over the nation of Israel, as His ministry came to a close. The note of judgment upon Israel and hope for the Gentiles sounded forth already early in His ministry. When He healed the centurion's slave and marveled at the faith of the Gentile centurion in contrast to the lack of such a faith in Israel, He sounded a new note: "And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:11-12). The ancient prophecy of Noah that Japheth would dwell in the tents of Shem (Gen. 9:27) would come to pass, while judgment would fall upon the chosen people of Israel.

The nation of Israel was pictured as a fig tree planted in the Vineyard, the Kingdom of God. The Keeper of the Vineyard, the Messiah, would fertilize the fig tree for three years. If it failed to bear fruit within that time, it would be cut down (Luke 13:6-9). Jesus added a postscript to that parable when He cursed the barren fig tree on His way to Jerusalem because it bore no fruit (Matt. 21:18-19). Judgment was looming!

That judgment was pronounced upon Jerusalem, amidst tears, as Jesus drew near and saw the city on Palm Sunday (Luke 19:41-44). He saw the city besieged and then leveled to the ground, "because you did not know the time of your visitation."

On Monday of Holy Week Jesus brought to life in new form the ancient Isaianic parable of the Vineyard. This time the Vineyard was the theocracy established in Israel, while the nation of Israel was pictured as the vine-dressers. The vine-dressers killed the servants of the heavenly Landowner. In amazing long-suffering the Landowner sent other servants greater than the first, the prophets – John the Baptizer. Him Israel also killed. Finally the Landowner sent His Son, whom the vine-dressers, the nation of Israel, would also kill. At that point Jesus asked the religious leaders of the nation of Israel to pronounce judgment. They did: The Landowner "will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vine-dressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." With those words the representatives of Israel unwittingly pronounced judgment upon themselves and their nation. That judgment Jesus reaffirmed in the words, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it." By this time the chief priests and Pharisees perceived that the parable of Jesus was directed against them! All three synoptists report this encounter (Matt. 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19).

Matthew alone recorded the parable of the wedding feast. The servants of the King, who extended the invitation of the King to the wedding of His Son, were spitefully treated and killed. The King's reaction was fury plus judgment: "He sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city." Thereafter He sent out His servants again, but this time into the highways (Matt. 22:1-14). The theme is consistently the same – judgment upon the nation of Israel and the opening up of the Kingdom to the Gentiles.

The final warning before The Olivet Address came in the eight "woes" pronounced upon Jerusalem, followed by our Lord's lament over Jerusalem. There was the ironic exhortation, "Fill up, then, the measure of your father's guilt," the assurance that judgment would fall upon that generation, and final sentence of judgment, "See! Your house is left to you desolate!" All judgment, but not quite all, for a word of hope brings the pronouncement of judgment to a conclusion, "For I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Matt. 23). The judgment theme predominates, but the note of mercy is still there. There would still be the remnant!

Then comes chronologically The Olivet Discourse. On the day of His death Jesus twice raised the warning note of judgment. When He was challenged by Caiaphas to answer the question as to whether He was "the Christ, the Son of God," Jesus did not hesitate. He answered in the affirmative and added words both of judgment and hope, "Hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64). Those words, resting on the ancient prophecy of Daniel (ch. 7), are both eschatological and immediate. They include the coming of the Lord in judgment upon Jerusalem and the nation of Israel as well as His coming for final judgment which will reveal the triumph of His Kingdom.

The final preachment of judgment was delivered to the women of Jerusalem, as He was being led out as the Green Tree to suffer and die for the dry tree that Israel was (Luke 23:28-31). When the day of judgment would come the wailing cry to the mountains and hills, "Fall on us!" and "Cover us" would once more be heard in Israel. Yet there was hope – in what was being so unjustly done to the Green Tree!

This brief historic review of Old Testament prophecies, some of which were quoted by Jesus and the apostles, together with prophecies of Jesus during His public ministry, confirm the contention that The Olivet Address was not an

isolated eschatological prophecy of our Lord, but rather the culmination of centuries of prophecies regarding the Covenant and the Kingdom as they related to the nation of Israel.

Note: All quotations are taken from the New King James' Version.

(To be continued)

Conference Sermon: Joshua 24:16-20*

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David Lau

So the people answered and said: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for the Lord our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed. And the Lord drove out from before us all the people, even the Amorites who dwelt in the land. We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God."

But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good."

Dear Fellow-Ministers of Our Lord Jesus Christ,

Martin Luther wrote in his Large Catechism, "God has given us the Gospel, in which is pure forgiveness before we prayed or ever thought about it." The Good News of the Gospel is precisely this, that God forgives us all of our sins for Jesus' sake. Our work as ministers of the Gospel revolves around the forgiveness of sins, even as Martin Luther has said in his Large Catechism, "Everything in the Christian Church is ordered to the end that we shall daily obtain there nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. . . . We are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but continuous, uninterrupted forgiveness of sin, both in that God forgives us, and in that we forgive, bear with, and help each other."

Since we know how important the forgiveness of sins is in our church work and in our daily lives, it may come as somewhat of a shock to hear the text that we have chosen for our consideration at this conference. Listen to these words of Joshua, as recorded in the book of Joshua, chapter 24. These words are addressed to the Israelites towards the end of Joshua's life. Joshua, the man of God, says to the people of God, "The Lord is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins."

What is going on here? Why does Joshua say such a thing to God's people? "He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins." Is it because the Lord of the Old Testament is different from the Lord of the New Testament? Is it because God, the holy God, the jealous God, never forgave sins in the Old Testament before the coming of Christ? No, that cannot be the reason that Joshua spoke as he did. For that generation, as well as the generation preceding it, knew the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins from all the ceremonial laws God gave to Moses as well as through their own personal experience. When the children of Israel called the golden calf their Lord and when God told Moses He would destroy this nation, Moses asked for one thing above all others. He prayed to God as the mediator between God and His people: "Forgive their sin, but if not, blot me out of Your book which You have written." God responded to Moses' prayer by forgiving the sins of Israel. In fact God at that point proclaimed His name to Moses in these words, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Let no one say that Moses and Joshua did not know anything about a forgiving God. They experienced His forgiveness at Mt. Sinai.

Later on, when the twelve spies returned from the land of Canaan with their report of a good land but caused unbelief to spring up in the hearts of the people because of their tales of giants and walled cities, God again threatened to destroy His people. What did Moses do? He reminded God of His name: "The Lord is long-suffering and abundant in

mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression.” Moses prayed: “Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.” What was God’s reply? “I have pardoned, according to your word.” God forgave the people their sins. The Israelites lived on the forgiveness of sins in the Old testament, just as we Christians live on the forgiveness of sins today. Their worship life revolved around the forgiveness of sins, just as our Christian worship today.

So why then did Joshua say, “The Lord is a holy God; He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins”? Why should He not forgive them at that time, since He had forgiven them and their fathers countless times before then? Is it because they had now turned away from the Lord?

No, that is not it, either. There is hardly a more wonderful confession in the Old Testament than the confession made by the Israelites on this occasion. Listen to their words: “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for the Lord our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed. And the Lord drove out from before us all the people, even the Amorites who dwelt in the land. We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God.”

All of these words are good words. There is not lacking anything in this confession. They ascribe all of their success to the Lord. He redeemed them. He preserved them. He protected them. And therefore they want to serve Him and Him alone, forsaking all other gods.

And yet, in spite of this fine confession, Joshua says to them: “You cannot serve the Lord, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins.”

Why does Joshua say these words when he must know that God delights in forgiving His people? Why, the Lord’s name is gracious and merciful and forgiving! Joshua’s statement seems to be designed to remind the people of what an amazing and unheard-of thing forgiveness of sins really is! Over and over again God had forgiven the sins of the Israelites. Perhaps the people had become so used to thinking of their God as a forgiving God that they were beginning to take His forgiveness **for granted**, almost as something that was their **due** because of their confession. We are the Lord’s people. Of course, the Lord will forgive us! We acknowledge Him in all of our ways. His name is always on our lips. We’re always talking about His mighty acts. God will always forgive our sins. Why not?

So Joshua **shocks** the people by telling them that the Lord will not forgive their sins, and that they **cannot serve** the Lord. Why not? Because the Lord is holy. The Lord is jealous. In view of all the blessings and victories that the Lord had given to them in the war against the Canaanites, they were on the verge of forgetting how unholy and how sinful they still were in the sight of a holy and jealous God. They were beginning to think of themselves as the good people and the heathen as the bad people, that God would punish the heathen because of their wickedness, but, of course, He would forgive the minor flaws of His own people.

And are we not in danger of making the same mistake ourselves? We are the actively confessing Church of the Lutheran Confession, serving the Lord, our God, who has blessed us and protected us and forgiven us all through the years. We are not abortionists, we are not liberals, we are not homosexuals, we are not unionists, we are not denominationalists, we are not universalists, we are the actively confessing Christians of a strictly conservative, confessional church body, God’s people for sure, and therefore fit to enjoy the forgiveness of sins from a gracious, loving God!

So let God remind us today that we cannot serve the Lord on the basis of any quality in ourselves that makes us superior to the most heretical blasphemer or the most derelict prostitute. In the light of God’s perfect holiness we are the blackest of all sinners, unworthy of anything good from Him. In the light of God’s absolute jealousy we are as idolatrous as the Canaanites, because we have not loved our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, nor served Him with all of our strength. In other words, we can’t make God forgive us, nor can we obligate Him to be good to us.

Therefore the Lord God warns us through the words of Joshua: “If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good.” God’s past blessings to us do not guarantee that those blessings will continue in the future. God’s past forgiveness of our sins does not mean we can count on that forgiveness in the future as something that is our due. God’s grace in Jesus Christ must remain for us the great, unexpected, unwarranted, unbelievable treasure that overwhelms us because we recognize how unworthy of it we really

are.

A wise Christian of our time has said, “It is not because of us but because of Himself that God forgives us.” I’m sure this is what Joshua wanted to teach the Israelites of his time, and this is what we need to remember today. Forgiveness of sins, yes! By grace alone, yes! For Christ’s sake, and only for Christ’s sake, not our own! Amen.