

Romans 9... 10... 11

The Book of Acts ended with Paul in Rome sounding this ominous note:

Acts 28:25 So when [the Jews] did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers,

Acts 28:26 saying, 'GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY: "HEARING YOU WILL HEAR, AND SHALL NOT UNDERSTAND; AND SEEING YOU WILL SEE, AND NOT PERCEIVE;

Acts 28:27 FOR THE HEARTS OF THIS PEOPLE HAVE GROWN DULL. THEIR EARS ARE HARD OF HEARING, AND THEIR EYES THEY HAVE CLOSED, LEST THEY SHOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, LEST THEY SHOULD UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEARTS AND TURN, SO THAT I SHOULD HEAL THEM."'

Acts 28:28 "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!"

Jews in Rome, and throughout the Roman empire, were struggling with the seeming contradiction between God's past promises to Israel and her present predicament.

They'd be struggling even more in just a few short years. Acts was written (we believe) in the early 60's. Starting about 68 or 69AD the Romans sieged and sacked Jerusalem, destroying the Temple.

How could any of those exhortations or events square with God's promises - many of them unconditional - to the nation of Israel?

Paul will show how God's past promises were consistent with Israel's present predicament. He looks in this chapter at the Patriarchs, at Pharaoh, at the Potter, and at the Prophets.

He looks at the Patriarchs first in verses six through sixteen. We'll look at it in two parts.

Romans 9:6 But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel,

“Taken no effect” means failed. The Word of God has not failed. God is not through with Israel. But there has been a change in God’s dealings with Israel. The mystery of the Church has been revealed now that Israel, as a nation, has been temporarily set aside. In the mean time individual Jews can be saved along with Gentiles.

Paul shows from the Old Testament Patriarchs that God never intended natural birth alone to determine salvation. Natural birth determined privilege - but *not* salvation. A natural born Jew was privileged to have the things listed in verses four and five, but these alone were insufficient to save him. A supernatural birth was also required.

Natural and supernatural birth are illustrated to the Jew in the offspring of Abraham.

Romans 9:7 nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "IN ISAAC YOUR SEED SHALL BE CALLED."

Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was born when Abraham went into to Sarah's maid, Hagar, and slept with her. Isaac was born when Sarah was past child bearing age and barren. Both sons were natural born Jews, but one was also seen to be supernaturally born in the sense that there was no natural way that Sarah could conceive.

Paul applies this truth in verses eight and nine:

Romans 9:8 That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.

Romans 9:9 For this is the word of promise: "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON."

In the Old Testament, even though both were natural born sons, only Isaac was said to be Abraham's seed.

There is a spiritual symbolism in the births of Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was conceived by the flesh. Isaac was received by faith. In the same way, not all those who are born Jews are considered God's children. Those who are born according to the flesh are like Ishmael. Those Jews who are also born to God by faith in Jesus Christ, those *supernaturally* born, are the children of God.

In the story of these two boys you learn that Ishmael was circumcised before Isaac. Nevertheless it was Isaac who inherited the promises.

In the same way, though Jews were “of the circumcision” and Gentiles generally were not, they were inheriting God’s promises.

On a natural level God cared for Ishmael and Hagar. He told Abraham that he would make of Ishmael a great nation (Genesis 17:20).

On a supernatural level God ignores Ishmael. For example, when God tells Abraham to go and sacrifice Isaac He says, “take your son, your only son, up to the mount” (Genesis 22:2).

So, you see, from the very beginning of the nation of Israel salvation was *not* by natural birth. It was *not* according to the flesh but according to faith.

We’re not Jews so we might tend to think this has little to do with us other than its theological importance. But who among us doesn’t still struggle with the flesh after we’ve been supernaturally born again?

We tend to produce our own Ishmael’s. We go with our own wisdom, we make our own plans, then ask God to bless them as His promises to them. The example I like to use that most of us can relate to is the typical church building project. The project may start out godly but it often turns fleshly. Manipulation and intimidation accompany the constant requests for money or volunteers. Then, when it is done,

the leaders say, "Look what God has done," when in reality it is what man has done.

But we need also to apply this on a more personal level. I can have my own personal 'building projects' in terms of what I want for my life and livelihood. I can make my plans then ask God to bless them. I can use personal politics or intimidation or manipulation in my relationships with others then act as though it was God all along desiring to bless me.

We are results oriented when we ought to be relationship oriented. By that I mean we ought to be most concerned with our relationship with the Lord. My relative successes or failures, as measured by the world's standards, are not who I am. They are not who you are. Even the wicked prosper - usually much more than you and I ever will.

The only constant is Jesus. Whether I abound or whether I am abased He is Jesus.

I love the line we sing, "He is God when we stand and God when we fall." It declares more than just that the Lord is with us in our suffering. It proclaims that success or suffering are insignificant in and of themselves. All that matters is that I know Jesus. The circumstances He chooses for me are designed to reveal more of Himself to me. More of His love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and faithfulness.

It is so hard to not analyze our lives by the world's standards. Position and possessions dominate the thinking of the world and they definitely creep in to the Church and in to our judgments.

We need to ignore Ishmael in favor of Isaac.

With a nod to *Moby Dick*, the 'book' we are writing of our lives as living epistles ought to start out, "**Don't** call me Ishmael!"