“A Complicated Family”

Romans 9:1-5

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So, like I said, chapter 9 offers a rather jarring transition in this letter. It’s like driving through the Nevada desert and stumbling upon the city of Las Vegas. It is filled with lights and green plans and giant fountains. It doesn’t seem to make much sense out there in the desert. Likewise chapters 9-11 don’t seem to make much sense in Paul’s letter.

We go from chapter 8 which was full of words about God’s grace and love. We see Paul pouring our brilliant statements about who God is. What God does for us. How we belong to God.

And then here in chapter 9, Paul gets emotional. He gets personal. He starts out rather oddly, saying “I’m speaking the truth in Christ, I’m not lying”. Like a child trying to convince grownups of his words, Paul flat out tells the church that he is not lying about this matter. He wants to make that clear. He brings in the authority of the Holy Spirit to give him credibility. To let the readers know that he is genuinely in anguish over this issue. He cries on behalf of his people, the Jewish nation, who have rejected Christ and refused to follow him. Paul says he’d be willing to switch places. To be cut off from Christ so that others may be grafted in.

As a Jewish convert, this is a very big deal for Paul. He went from being a bit of a celebrity in the Jewish world, to a missionary for Jesus. He left behind his roots in his dramatic conversion and now he mourns for those in his previous world who are not living in Christ with him. His fellow Jews have actually become hostile toward these new Christians. Anyone who has watched their grown child walk away from their faith and the church, can understand Paul’s heartache. He wants them included in Christ’s family, but they have no interest in it.

In this portion of his letter, Paul addresses how God’s children create a complicated family.

There are those who were the firstborn. The Israelites who have worshipped God for centuries. They were given the covenant through Abraham, the law through Moses. They were told they were God’s chosen people. The promise was made to them that salvation would be theirs.

And then there are the adopted children. The Greeks and Gentiles who have entered this family through faith in Jesus Christ. They’ve been grafted in to that original branch and are considered complete children of God. The ones welcomed in by the new covenant made through God’s son.

This is a complicated family, indeed.

Jen Hatmaker, a Christian author from Austin often talks about her complicated family. She and her husband have three biological children. God had written it upon their hearts that they should adopt two children from Ethiopia. Like most international adoptions, this was not an easy task. There were hurdles to jump through, lots of bureaucracy to deal with. And a lot of waiting for the paperwork to get processed. Hatmaker describes this stage of the process and the incubation time. She says :

“This is the stage you realize God can put a [vicious fight](http://jenhatmaker.com/blog/2011/07/06/fighters)in you for a kid without your blood coursing through his veins. **Those early doubts about loving a child without the helpful instincts of biology are put to rest.** Of course, you don’t know this kid yet, but you love him in your heart, in your bones. You’ll fight like hell to get to him. You can’t think of anything else. You are obsessed. You dream about him like you did when you were pregnant. **[God} changes us for one another.** God can create a family across countries, beyond genetics, through impossible circumstances, and past reason.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Hatmaker describes those months leading up to meeting their adopted children. How her heart was opening up for them to enter in. How surprised she was by her heart’s capacity to welcome in two new children into their home. Children whom she didn’t carry in her womb. Children who don’t share her blood. But they are her children, nonetheless.

In her blog she chronicles the months and years after the adoption date. She openly talks about how messy the process was of welcoming in her two new children, while making the three biological children feel loved. She feared that her three children would resent their new siblings. That these three who have been in the family since birth would hate the two who had been adopted. It was rocky for a while, but now the children get along as if the two adopted ones had been there the whole time. The children understand that they are all family and all loved by their parents.

This is Paul’s hope for God’s children. He wants those who were included in the original covenant to embrace those who have been brought in by the new covenant. Yes, they are different branches of the same family, but they are family all the same.

This is messy business. The relationship between Jews and Christians has been tainted with violence. The Holocaust in Europe is one such example. Christians twisted Scripture around to justify cruel and heinous treatment of the Jewish people. At least 6 million lives paid the price for this outrageous way of thinking. We as Christians must never rank ourselves above others in such a way, in order to justify such violence. We must understand that God desires a different way.

So how does this family work? When there are those who have been in it all along, and those who have been adopted into it.

Paul wants the Jewish nation to know that they have not been kicked to the curb. They’ve not been rejected by God and replaced by these new children in Christ. He does not want the Jewish nation to resent these new Christians. The election of Israel is not in question here.

Paul reminds the readers that God has a history of shaking things up. Of doing the opposite of what we expect. Like when Rebekah was pregnant with Esau and Jacob. God told her that the firstborn would serve the younger, going against the hard and fast rules for family living.

Or when Joseph told his brothers he dreamt that they would one day serve him, the youngest of 12. They were angered and outraged, and sold him into slavery, only to find themselves years later at his mercy when their land suffered a drought and he had provisions.

So maybe the Israelites shouldn’t have been surprised when Jesus introduced the new covenant. The one that would expand the boundaries and welcome in those who were previously outside God’s family. Making provision for non-Jews to be welcomed in as God’s children. God has this funny way of reversing what we think the order should be. Of welcoming in those whom we think should be left out.

Jesus embodied this nearly every day that he walked this earth. God’s people expected a mighty king who would save them from their misery. Instead they got a tiny little baby, born in a humble manger. Born to a working poor family. This savior would travel from town to town, a homeless guy who would teach about humility and love. Welcoming sinners and tax collectors to his table. Other than being from Jewish lineage, Jesus is not what God’s people expected at all.

Isn’t that God’s nature? To shake things up and throw us through a loop? Just when we think we know how God will respond, we’re surprised with a whole different outcome.

Maybe instead of worrying about who is in and who is out of God’s kingdom, we should read this passage in the context of God’s love. We should see this text as evidence that God’s love is big enough for those in the original covenant – the Jews, God’s people of Israel. And God’s love is big enough to include those in the new covenant – the Gentiles and Greeks. The ones who didn’t have any sort of heritage in God’s biological family. The ones who have been adopted in.

If we go back to chapter 8 of Paul’s letter to the Romans, we’re reminded that nothing, not even heritage or nationality can separate us from the love of God.

God’s love is big enough for all of us, and God is faithful to all of creation. God is in charge of deciding who is in and who is out.

A few weeks ago during our Roman Holiday discussion, we were on the topic of the Lord’s Supper. In some traditions, people might be turned away from taking communion because they are deemed sinful and unworthy. In our church we wouldn’t dream of such a thing. If one person were too sinful to commune with Jesus at the Table, then none of us would qualify. We’ve all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But the radical message of God’s grace is that it isn’t up to us decide who is worthy. God makes that decision and does so out of abundant love. Love beyond our understanding. This love is big enough to encompass all of us. Every one of us. Thanks be to God! Let us pray.

1. From her blogpost: http://jenhatmaker.com/blog/2012/08/21/the-truth-about-adoption-one-year-later [↑](#footnote-ref-1)