

August 6, 2017 – Romans 9:1-13

I think just about everybody has seen them. Many of us have likely used them. You open a Bible to the very first pages, or maybe the very last. And there you see a list of Bible verses. And each one has a little topic associated with it. Verses for when you're worried. Verses for when you're lonely. Verses for when you're tempted. Verses for when you're in danger. They're there to be helpful. They're there to be a guide. The Bible can be a pretty intimidating book.

But then there are other times that we use those kinds of guides. Times that we abuse them. Times that we are worried or lonely or tempted or in danger. And instead of using that circumstance as motivation to spend more time in scripture on a regular basis, we turn to the two or three verses listed. And we get a little morale boost from Jesus telling us to cast our cares on Him and from Paul telling us that all things work together for good.

And then we go on with our lives. And that Bible may not get opened again for days or weeks or months. Until the next time we have a crisis. And we crack it open again to read another handful of feel-good verses.

You may have noticed, I never use Scripture that way in my sermons. And there's a reason for that. The Bible is not just a list of feel-good verses to get us through a crisis. It's a story. It's God's story. It's the story of God's interaction with humanity. Of how he created us. And chose us. And guided us. And redeemed us through his Son.

And he has revealed it to us so that we can know him better. So that we can know all that he has done for us. The Bible does not exist so that we can help ourselves. It exists so that we can know the God who has helped us more than we can ever imagine.

Imagine you had a family member. An older family member. And they pass away before you ever really get a chance to know them. But in their will they leave to you their diary. With instructions that you should read it and get to know them better through the stories they tell.

So you take it. And you open it up. And you read one sentence out of it. And it's a great sentence. Something really inspiring. Something that makes you feel pretty good.

And then you close up the book. And you go and tell all your friends how great your Aunt Mildred was. And how inspiring her diary is. And how much you've really gotten to know her by reading it. All from that one sentence.

Do you really know her? No. Do you even know why she wanted you to read her diary? No. Is it actually kind of insulting that you would treat her last wishes in this regard? Yeah, kinda.

And yet, that's really not that much different than what we're prone to do with God's Word. When you don't read the whole story, you end up with a Bible that's more about what little nuggets of wisdom that you've chosen to get out of it. And less about what God is trying to teach you, through the entire history of his people.

Which is where we pick up our Epistle lesson for today. Because Paul, better than anyone, understands the importance of knowing that history. Of knowing God's entire story, and not just the little nuggets that we've chosen to get out of it.

He knows that because, to be blunt, he's a Jew. And that's exactly what he tells the church in Rome at the beginning of this passage. Paul is in anguish over the fact that there are so many of his Jewish kinsmen who have not become Christians. If he could be cursed by God and sent to hell in order that all the rest of the Jews might come to faith, he would do it. He would let himself be cut off from Christ for the sake of his brothers. That's how passionately he feels about it.

And it's not just because they are kinsmen according to the flesh. That is to say, it's not just because they share some ethnic, genetic heritage that he cares about. It's the fact that they are Israelites.

They were the ones to whom the promise was originally given. They were the people whom God adopted. They were the people to whom God made his covenant. They were the people to whom God gave his law. They are the descendants of the patriarchs. Of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And Jesus himself was born a Jew.

And the Jews, of all people on the earth, *should* understand the importance of God's story. Because they've lived it. It's their history. It's their promise. But so many of them have chosen to cling to the flesh. Have chosen to ignore the Word of God and cling to their ethnic heritage. Even though that very heritage should tell them that God doesn't care about things of the flesh.

And he's proven it in one of the patriarchs. Because Jacob didn't inherit God's promise according to the flesh. He was the younger brother. God's people should have been the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Esau. But God gave his promise to Jacob and not to Esau. And so God's people came from the line of Jacob and not Esau.

It's as simple as that. We are people of God's promise and the children of those to whom he chooses to give his promise. So I am a child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Not because I may or may not have any Jewish DNA in my body. But because God gave Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob his promise to make them his children. And God has given me his promise to make me his child. And God has given you his promise to make you his child. And that makes us all family. Not by flesh, but by faith.

The Bible is not the story of how God saved the Jews in the Old Testament and the Christians in the New Testament. It's the story of how God has saved his chosen, adopted, beloved children throughout the entire history of the world. And how the promise that Abraham heard is the same promise that you and I hear. At the baptismal font. And at the communion rail. And every time I stand before you and proclaim to you the forgiveness of your sins.

The story matters. All of it. Because the entirety of the Gospel can be found even in the Old Testament. And we see that happen over and over again in Scripture. We see it happen at Pentecost. Peter stands up before the crowd. The Jewish crowds think he's drunk or crazy.

But the words he speaks are not just lucid and rational. They're familiar to them. Because he points to the prophecies of Joel and David. And then he says, "Yeah, that day of the Lord that Joel talked about? That happened. And that salvation that David promised? It has come to us through Jesus Christ." And three thousand were added to their number that day.

We see it happen again with the Evangelist Philip. Philip is taken by the Spirit out into the desert where he finds an Ethiopian official. And the official is reading the book of Isaiah.

And Philip asks him, "Do you know what you're reading?" And the official says, "I haven't a clue." And so Philip proceeds to teach him that the suffering servant Isaiah talked about is Jesus. He's already come. He's already suffered, died, and risen again that we might be baptized into his name. And the official immediately responds. "Well then baptize me!"

We see it all through scripture. From Jesus telling the crowds of Nazareth that the words of the prophet were fulfilled in their hearing. To Paul leading the Jews at the synagogue through the prophecies of the Messiah all the way to Jesus. Over and over again.

If you want to know the story of what God has done for you. If you want to know the fullness of it. The fullness of God made flesh for our salvation. The fullness of all that God has done for his people – for you – throughout history. Then you can't let yourself be satisfied with an inspirational sentence here and a comforting verse there.

You need to read the whole thing. You need to know the Old Testament as well as any Jew. And you need to know the New Testament as well as those first Christians. Not because knowing it all will save you any more than anyone else. That's not what I'm saying. The thief on the cross next to Jesus was secure in his salvation with a single sentence of God's Word: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

No, it's not about who's saved and who's not saved. It's not about knowing it all because knowing the Bible will save you. Rather, we search out scripture and work out our salvation in fear and trembling because knowing it all will let you know the God who saved you even when you didn't know it all.

Even when you were a helpless infant, receiving his gifts like any child does. It will let you know and hear and believe and love and follow all the more fully the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. The Christ who is God over you and loves you to the very end. Amen.