

August 6, 2023 – Romans 9:1-13

We are people who live by the law. I'm not sure how much we fully realize that, sometimes. Our entire lives are governed by laws. Laws of all sorts. Something as simple as cause and effect is a law, after all. That the pews you are all sitting in don't suddenly turn to jello is a law. God has given this world laws that make it predictable and livable.

Laws keep things together and in line. Laws of nature define our physical existence. Without the periodic table of elements, there is no chemistry. Without Newton's laws, there is no physics. Without the universal constants, there is no universe. There are a lot of laws at work all around us right now.

And there are laws for our society too. Civil laws that define what we can and can't do. We take those laws for granted as well. Perhaps we shouldn't. I was just reading an article about San Francisco. Downtown San Francisco is becoming a ghost town. Business after business is simply closing up shop and leaving.

Why? Because there is no rule of law. The law simply isn't enforced. People go where they want to go. Do what they want to do. Defecate where they want to defecate. Steal what they want to steal. And the police do nothing. And so what should be the center of their community has become a wasteland of empty storefronts and homeless encampments. Turns out, the enforcement of the law is really important to the functioning of society. Who knew?

Well, we do, I think. But the pendulum can swing too far as well. Sometimes the law is so much a part of our lives that the Gospel becomes a strange, foreign language. Grace? Forgiveness? Mercy? You can't run a business on boundless grace. You can't teach your children right and wrong with unmerited forgiveness. You can't govern a society with overflowing mercy. We know perfectly well that the Old Adam will take advantage of it each and every time.

The problem comes when we take horizontal laws that are good for our businesses and families and governments and try to use them vertically. God doesn't deal with us by the same set of rules that we use to deal with one another. The law works quite well horizontally: how we deal with our neighbor. But the law does not help us at all vertically: how we stand before God.

That was the problem that arose over time with Israel. God gave Israel laws for how they should govern themselves and they worked. So then Israel tried to live by the law before God and they failed. Why? Because God never intended for them to live by the law before him. God intended for them to live by faith in his mercy. By faith in his promises of redemption. Most of all, by faith in the coming Messiah.

So what happened then? When the promise God made to Israel came true, when Israel's Messiah, Jesus Christ, came, most of the Jewish people rejected him. Here was the embodiment of God's pure grace, and Israel clung to law. Because the Gospel was a strange, foreign language to them and they refused to listen.

And I don't know if we grasp how personal this was to the Apostle Paul. When Paul talks about his desire to see the Jews repent in our Epistle lesson today, he's not just talking in the abstract. This isn't a hypothetical situation.

Paul was born a Jew. He came from a Jewish family. He grew up with Jewish friends. He was taught by Jewish teachers. When he talks about his brothers and kinsmen according to the flesh, he's talking about actual family members and childhood friends and mentors in the faith who taught him God's Word from his earliest years. These are people very, very close to him.

And so he speaks of his great distress, his anguish of heart, his sorrow over his fellow Israelites. Religiously speaking, they had it all: the Torah, the prophets, the promises, the covenants, the worship, status as God's favored nation, his chosen people, the apple of his eye. And yet they did not believe. And Paul was willing to be damned in their place if that were possible: *"For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers."*

And looking at this heartbreaking situation, it could seem as though the Word of God had failed. That God had given up on his chosen people. Made a covenant with Abraham and then broke that covenant, in favor of the Gentiles. So much for the reliability of God's promises!

But that's not actually the case. Because that would only be true if faith was hereditary. And it's most definitely not. Most of you know that through experience. Christian parents don't necessarily bring up Christian children. We bring them to Baptism. We bring them to church. We teach them. We occasionally are forced to fight against the protests of the old Adam. And yet some don't stay with it.

Like the Israelites, they had gifts, but faith didn't appear to take hold. Or, if it did, it withered like the seedling in shallow soil or was choked by the weeds of this world. Paul's way of expressing this is really interesting: *"For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel."* Not all Israel is Israel. Taking an ancestry.com test and tracing your genetics back to Abraham doesn't make you an Israelite.

To underscore this, Paul reminds us of Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was the legal firstborn by Hagar, Sarah's servant. He was entitled to the inheritance of the firstborn. The law said so. But Ishmael was conceived out of unbelief, trusting in the laws of nature – that a young woman is more fertile than an old woman – over the promise of God that a barren woman in her nineties could conceive and bear a son.

The blessing of the covenant was not given to Ishmael but Isaac. The son of the promise. The son born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. God throws out the rule book and saves by grace. Faith in the promise, not the laws of biology.

Interestingly, the same thing happens for our Lord in his incarnation. A virgin conceived and bore a son. That violates everything you learned about the birds and the bees. But God doesn't save by the law. God doesn't even obey the laws of nature.

He throws out the law and does his own Gospel thing where old women and virgins conceive. Where five loaves and two fish feed 10,000. Where sinners are forgiven by Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Where dead men rise from the grave. Ishmael and Isaac remind us that salvation is not hereditary. The law of the firstborn doesn't apply. We must be secondborn in order to be children of the promise.

Paul finds a second example in the patriarchs as well: Jacob and Esau. They were twins, but Esau was the older brother by a few seconds. That was enough. The law said he was the elder brother. The birthright was his. The blessings of the covenant was his.

But God didn't chose Esau. God chose Jacob. God didn't chose the firstborn. He chose the secondborn. And so while they play out this ridiculous family drama of bowls of stew and goatskin disguises, God knows all along who he will call. Before they were ever born, before they had done anything good or bad, God loved Jacob.

Does this mean that Jacob was saved and Esau damned? Of course not. Esau is as important to salvation history as is Jacob. Ishmael is as important as Isaac. And even if Ishmael and Esau weren't the sons born of the promise, if they believed the promise, they were just as surely saved. No, Esau and Ishmael are reminders that God works through grace and not law. That salvation is not about what you do but about what God does in Christ for you.

Jacob and Esau remind us that God's election is by grace. It's a gift, without any merit or worthiness in us. To be treated as firstborn, we must be secondborn.

And so we are. Christ is the firstborn. The only begotten Son of God. We are the secondborn. Born again of water and the Spirit. And yet, we receive the inheritance of the firstborn: the Kingdom of God. We are not children of the flesh. We are children of the promise.

Children who, like Isaac, put our hope in things that defy the laws of nature: rebirth by Holy Baptism and resurrection from the dead on the last day. Children who, like Jacob, are chosen before we are even born and called by His Spirit. Loved by God not because of works, for he loved us before we had ever done either good or bad.

Not all Israel is Israel. And many who are not Israel, are Israel. For you see, you are Israel. I am Israel. I may not have an ounce of Jewish blood in me, but I am a child of the promise. I may have no claim to Israelite ancestry according to the Law. But the Law does not work vertically. It does not change my standing before God.

According to God, we are children of Abraham. According to God, we are children of Isaac. According to God, we are His children. That makes us Israel. That makes us heirs of his covenant. Heirs of his kingdom. Heirs of eternal life. Amen.