

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2B**  
**Class Notes 4/10/22**

One of the points I have been making in this class is that we Christians have a flawed theology, a distorted sense of who we are and how we relate to God, because we have left out the story of Israel from our story, from the way we read the New Testament. A few weeks ago I gave a classic example of this: the regular misuse in the church of a verse from the beginning of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, where he says that God's promises are "yes" in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). I argued based on numerous other passages in Paul's letters that when Paul speaks of God's promises he has in mind the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants, to bless them and to make them a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1-3).

After class that day, Susan asked me why Paul makes this statement about God's promises in the middle of a discussion of his travel plans, his hopes to visit Macedonia and then Corinth and then have them send him on his way to Judea. I responded that I think in the back of his mind, those two seemingly disparate topics are actually closely related, and so I decided to explore more fully the significance for Paul of his travel plans, which we find detailed in several of his letters. Paul's plan to visit Macedonia and Corinth and Judea is actually connected to the story of Israel, to the promises God made to Abraham. And it speaks to Paul's larger understanding of what the church should be all about and to issues we have been discussing in this class.

We saw that Paul wants to come to Corinth after visiting Macedonia because in both places he is taking up a collection, an offering that he plans to take to the churches in Judea. The Judean churches seem to have been perpetually struggling financially, and for some time now Paul has been encouraging the mostly Gentile Christians in Asia Minor and Greece to set aside funds to help their Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

Later in Second Corinthians, Paul explains more at length his theological understanding of this offering as a way of encouraging the Corinthians to give generously.

For Paul the offering is an act of worship. *"This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God"* (2 Cor. 9:12). God has been generous with us, and we respond in thanksgiving, not by holding a praise and worship service but by giving of our resources to others in need. Such giving is an act of thankful worship. We will see shortly that Paul uses the language of priestly sacrifice to talk about this offering. Note here one of the most fundamental biblical teachings, that God's blessing to us is not for our own benefit but so that we may be a blessing to others.

In 2 Cor. 9:8-9, Paul quotes Psalm 112:9, which speaks of God's blessing on those who are generous to the poor. Righteousness here is defined by what you do with your money. Note that Paul's language in this passage about good works and righteousness and obedience runs counter to traditional Protestant theology. Faith and obedience, grace and works, are not opposites or two separate things but one and the same reality. Confessing the gospel, proclaiming the good news of Jesus, means doing good works, specifically

sharing one's possessions with all those in need (v. 13). That is precisely what it means to be filled with God's grace. And it is bringing about this "obedience of faith" among the Gentiles, a phrase with which Paul opens and closes his letter to the Romans, that Paul says is the goal of his ministry (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). Paul here, as in so many other places, is clearly teaching "works righteousness."

### **Two practical points:**

1) Paul insists that the Corinthians should give in proportion to what they have so that there might be economic equality among the saints: *"Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are suffering, but that there might be equality. At the present time your abundance will supply their need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written, 'The one who gathered much did not have too much and the one who gathered little did not have too little'"* (2 Cor. 8:12-15). The goal is a fair balance. Right now they are in need of your surplus; perhaps in the future when you are in need, they may be able to provide for you. No one in the community should go wanting while others have more than they need. Paul does not want this offering to be a burden or hardship on the Corinthians, but he recognizes that we all from time to time are blessed with "something extra" that we can share with others less fortunate. He cites the verse in Exodus 16:18 which is talking about manna. That story from Torah illustrates the principle Paul has in mind: God supplies abundantly, and people's needs are met, but they should not take more than they need.

2) Paul delegates the actual collection to others, to representatives of the various churches that are contributing (8:16-24). I think he has several reasons for this. First, he wants to avoid any appearance of impropriety in the handling of the funds. He wants everyone to see that this money will be going for its intended purpose. Second, the gift is personal. As we have already seen, it is not just churches writing checks. They are giving "of themselves" (8:5) because people's needs are more than just financial. Paul wants to make a personal connection between the disparate groups in the church. Third, this is a communal gift, not Paul's own individual offering. He doesn't want his name put on a plaque at the Jerusalem church. Those accompanying Paul not only will make the personal connection when they get to Jerusalem, but will also be part of the interconnected network when they go back home. They will bring testimony to all the churches about the love made incarnate in this offering (v. 24). This is genuine *koinonia*, real fellowship, the community of goods, that Paul hopes will connect the whole church.

### **Romans 15**

Near the end of his letter to the Romans, we find Paul once again discussing his travel plans. For many years Paul has been working with churches in Asia Minor and what we call Greece, including the church at Corinth. But now he hopes to be able to move westward, visiting Rome but ultimately reaching as far as Spain. *"I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia*

*have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. So, when I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will set out by way of you to Spain” (15:23-28).* He explains that he has intended to come to Rome for many years, but he hasn't been able to do so and he wants to take a slight detour first, back to Jerusalem. So he writes the letter to Rome as an introduction of himself to them in anticipation of his visit. In fact, Paul will only make it to Rome as Caesar's prisoner.

By the time Paul writes his letter to the Romans, he has finished with collecting funds for Jerusalem. He has made it back to Corinth, and writes while he is wintering there, waiting to catch a ship to Judea with the offering. Sea travel was hazardous during the winter months, so this seems to have been his regular practice (see 1 Cor. 16:6). But his purpose for the collection is still on his mind and it dovetails quite neatly with what he has been arguing in the letter. So he brings it up near the end of the letter even though he is not trying to raise money from the Romans themselves. The collection is part of his larger purpose as God's servant which he wants the Romans to understand, and is part of his vision of what the church should be.

The discussion in the first part of chapter 15 summarizes what has been Paul's central issue in the letter: how the gospel is for Jews and Gentiles (not, "how we get saved"). He anguishes over the growing divisions in the church between the two groups, and appeals to them to live in unity and love despite their differences. Because we don't care about this issue anymore, even though we should, we miss how important it is for Paul. I have argued that to properly understand Romans you need to read it backwards, and we did just that several years ago in the Wednesday night Bible study. You need to start at the end to see what is really on Paul's mind, what his real concerns are in writing to the Roman Christians.