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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

A State of Affairs Most Shocking

By Ron Allen

As part of a chapel exercise during my college days, one of the religion professors distributed a short quiz aimed at testing the basic Bible knowledge of the student body. It was meant to be a challenge and an invitation to more Bible reading. We were asked to take a few minutes to complete the quiz, and then the professor supplied the correct answers.

When chapel was over and we were cascading down the exit stairs, a plaintive voice called out above the general din: "I got all the answers wrong. And I thought I was among the elect!" The sound of, perhaps guilty, laughter added to the racket, and we all went back to our classes.

Recalling that minor episode from my college days makes me think of Isaac's two sons, Jacob and Esau. Esau was the first-born. As such, he had prior claim upon his sire's blessing, which included his estate and whatever kudos went with being principal of the clan. Both sons grew up knowing that this was how things would be; this would be the pecking order in their family.

Esau was exuberant and physical. He lived sensually and confidently. He was sure enough of himself to be reckless and inattentive as to his privileged rank. On the other hand, Jacob lived a more tentative, cautious life, far less assured in his position. Isaac, however, on the brink of death, gave the birthright blessing—not to Esau, but to Jacob!

Esau was inconsolable; a bitter wail erupted from him. His world was turned upside down. What he had taken for granted as to his place in the world and in God's order, was confounded. Further, what he had assumed about the status of his brother in these matters was also overthrown. The whole business stuck in his craw. We can almost feel Esau's bewilderment, as if to hear him exclaim, "I thought I was the elect."

In chapters 9, 10 and 11 of his Roman letter, Paul addresses an Esau-like bafflement among his fellow Jews. In the last part of Romans 8, the apostle rhapsodizes eloquently on the love of a God. A love made concrete by Christ. A love achievement that was implied in the Hebrew Bible, presaged in God's dealings with Israel, prefigured by the temple rites and ceremonies as well as being intimated and called-for by the Law of Moses.

However, a glaring problem has protruded awkwardly into the contemporary scene. The problem is that the bulk of Israel's people have rejected Jesus. They have turned their back on the One who epitomized their history, discounted the

One of whom Moses and the Prophets did write, discounted Him who brought to fruition their long-cherished hopes. They have been reckless with their privilege.

What a scandal! The majority of the race, entrusted with stewardship of the incipient gospel, have rejected its incarnation.



How could such a widespread refusal be reconciled with the fact that these people were God's chosen? We can almost hear some of them exclaim: "We thought we were the elect."

There was another equally vexing complication. Not only was Israel—in the main—missing out on the Messianic blessing but now, that very favor was being taken up by people with no genetic connection to Abraham at all—Gentiles. In places like

Antioch and Rome there were more Gentiles in the church than Jews. If God was now accepting the heathen, had he gone back on the promises he made to the patriarchs?

Israelites had long been dismissive of nations on their borders. They saw them as foolish, far from God and cut off from knowledge of him. They believed that God was enduring their wickedness; allowing them to ripen for judgment—a prospect many anticipated with relish.

But now, people who were certain objects of wrath, fit only for destruction (9:22), deserving of nothing but condemnation, were being justified by God's grace. Those long perceived to be aliens to the divine commonwealth were now *right with God*. God had counted in the ne'er-do-wells whom he was supposed to have counted out. Why were they not being unished? Had God's word failed? (9:6). Is God unjust? (9:14). Has God rejected his people? (11:1). These questions loomed large in the minds of Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah, and who worried about the rest of their people who rejected him.

First, Paul affirms that God's election of Israel was real (9:4, 5). God really did make Israel his firstborn. He made an imperial choice of Abraham and said, "I will make of you a great nation." But, God went on after that to lay down a track record of unilateral choices. When Abraham had a son, Ishmael, God said, 'Not him, another son, Isaac.' After that came Isaac's twins, Esau and Jacob. As we have already noted, God went against what was expected and chose Jacob, the younger of the two.

This is God's way. He picks individuals and peoples; bestowing on them privileges and advantages that others

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“...I delight in weakness and insults and hardships, in persecutions and difficulties”
(2 Corinthians 12:10).*

Peculiar delight! Paul’s Corinthian correspondence preserves for us some of his deeply personal struggles. Though they must be far from an exhaustive account of his trials, they nevertheless supply us with insight into the kinds of things he prayed about.


When he came into Macedonia he was in the thick of trouble; he found no relief from the strain of things. He was besieged by opposition and wrangling, and his mind was plagued by fears (2 Corinthians 7:5). An oft-repeated theme in his prayers was what he called his ‘thorn in the flesh.’ He wanted God to rid him of this miserable visitation, but instead of relief, God told him, *“My grace is sufficient for you”* (2 Corinthians 12:9). This was the answer to prayer which lies back of Paul’s delight in the verse above. He went on to declare his intention to rejoice in not having received the exact answer to prayer he had sought (the excision of his thorn).

There are those who, having gone through a similar experience, point to it as proof that God does not answer prayer. Yet, Paul draws the surprising conclusion that God is bringing to pass an answer far in excess of the one asked for, and far more satisfying. He concluded that God’s grace was

more to be desired than immediate relief from trouble.

In this, Paul was following in the steps of his Master. Jesus accepted his Father’s method in the world. This does not mean that he did not find it arduous. He did—more than anyone. He wrestled with “the cup that my father has given to me.” He cringed and swooned at its enormity, and went on to accept that it filled to the brim with gracious intent. He endured *“for the joy set before him”* (Hebrews 12:2).

All of us are tempted to think that because our prayer for a specific outcome has not yielded the desired result, that prayer is useless; that God is not there, or if he is, he is not listening; but his silence may have precisely the opposite meaning. We are conditioned to think that the forces that run the universe are the ones with the most bustle and din. Scripture has another view: the powers that decide destiny and shape eternity are spiritual. Like the sunrise, they are formidable but noiseless.

The dark silences of the spiritual journey, like Gethsemane and Golgotha, are those most likely to contain God’s choicest miracle—the miracle that occurs when a soul finds entrance into intimate communion with God. And, instead of being disappointed by it, a person is enriched and strengthened. Such was the secret of Paul’s delight, and it is for us. 

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don’t have. And he works the same way today.

Privilege and opportunity are not evenly distributed in this world. If you live in a land where there is stable, representative government, you are a person of privilege. If you live in a land where the organs of government are heavily influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, where your liberties are large, you are free to earn a living by working for yourself, where you are innocent until proven guilty—you belong to a select group. Most people in the world do not have that.

If you live where basic education is free to all citizens, you are privileged. If you have your life where water quality, food, health, transport and workplace safety are matters of public interest and state regulation—you have benefits that many go begging for.

If you are physically and mentally able, you are highly favored. Not everyone is. If your parents loved you and took care of your every need so that you never wanted for shelter, clothing, comfort, support and encouragement, you are fortunate indeed.

If you have a job, you are blessed. If you are not one of a

minority group within society, and do not have to struggle against headwinds of prejudice and suspicion, you are one of the chosen. God has set his favor upon you and not on someone else. Why?

It is vital to know first of all, why not? Privileged folk are not that way because they are worthy. Conversely, disadvantaged folk are not in that condition because they deserve no more than that. Did God call Abraham because he was a better person than other heathens in Ur? Was Jacob a better man than Esau? (Read the story. Esau was the more likeable one.) Did God choose Israel because it was composed of more promising material? No.

“The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the people on the face of the earth to be his treasured possession. Did he choose you because you were more numerous? No. It was because he loved you” (Deuteronomy 7:6, 7).

“Not for your sakes, O house of Israel, am I doing these things, but for the sake of my holy name” (Ezekiel 36:22).

When God elects individuals or groups of people, it is not because he found the right qualities in them. In election, God does not hold a beauty contest. The qualities are all on his side. →

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Full-Life Christian Service

By Elton Trueblood

It is our fate to live at a time when all thoughtful people realize that extinction is a life possibility, but we dare not stop at this point. What is most important, practically, is our reaction to this tremendous fact. The most beneficent form which this reaction can take is the decision to organize our lives *as though* they are to go on, and thus make the fundamental wager.

We know, of course, that this policy is a gambler's choice, but there is good reason for gambling in this particular way. The difficulty of any alternative view is that it is self-defeating. If we react to the crisis of our time by turning away from marriage and disciplined work and other essentials of a permanent society, we are thereby adding to the mood of crisis which can so easily become the mood of futility. As Thucydides long ago suggested, fatalism tends to produce what it dreads, for men do not oppose what they consider inevitable.

How, it is asked, can you plan a life when your major decisions are already being made for you, both by circumstances and by governments? Though we really cannot blame young people for the sense of futility that settles upon them in these circumstances, the futility is nevertheless an evil. It will make matters worse. When people cease to believe in the dignity of work, discouragement has reached a very low point, a lower point than we have usually known. Many in the past, have continued to believe in work after they ceased to believe in God or in human love or in survival after death.

All this, however, appears to be changing. We must find a way, even in the midst of our perplexed and perplexing generation, to keep and recover the sense of the sacredness of the work of our hands and brain.

We have made much of the phrase, "full-time Christian service," thereby referring to the priesthood, the ministry and to definite missionary work. The supposition is that people are called to these as they are not called to other occupations. Our rule in this matter must be, "not less but more." Instead of "full-time Christian service," we shall do well to speak of "full-life Christian service." The really crucial decision comes, not when a person decides to be a foreign missionary rather than a farmer; the really crucial decision comes when a man decides he will live his whole life in what Thomas Kelly called "Holy Obedience." Whether that leads to farming, or banking, or evangelistic work in Africa is



then wholly secondary. The major decision has already been made, and the decision is to allow one's entire life to be a channel of love.

This, whatever our work may be, involves a break with a merely secular order. If we were to take our religion seriously we should see the ordination to the priesthood as a sacrament; but we should likewise see ordination to any worthwhile human task as a sacrament. It is just as important for one boy to decide to be a Christian businessman as it is for another boy to decide to become a Christian clergyman.

The most damaging criticism which thoughtful young people make of current religion is not that it is untrue, but that it is irrelevant. It is so tangential to life that whether it is true or not makes no real difference. No religion is irrelevant if it helps people to see the hidden glory of the common things they do.

The world is one, secular and sacred, and the chief way to serve the Lord is in our daily work. The missionary task is not merely that of India and Africa, but that of America and Europe as well. The conversion of the world will not come by the efforts of clergymen merely, but by the efforts of all who are deeply committed. Thus, there can be one central vocation, while there are many professions. Some persons can contribute most to the

conversion of the world by working in banks, and some can do most by working in hospitals.

Part of our trouble is that we have so often left the religious job to those who are supposed to be professionally religious. "It's their responsibility isn't it?" But decline comes this way. The task is far too large for any one group, no matter how deeply dedicated and able they may be. The idea of being 'professionally religious' is a pernicious idea anyway, because of the degree to which it seems to excuse the rank and file of a solemn responsibility. Nobody can have my religion for me, any more than he can have my health for me. It is wholly proper that some men should give themselves to the professional task of preaching or of counseling, but it is pernicious to suppose they are thereby in more sacred callings than others or that the responsibility of others is thereby lessened.

-Elton Trueblood: THE COMMON VENTURES OF LIFE, pp. 81-88.

The qualities are in him.

Another important point needs to be made. Those who God does not favor are not for that reason removed from his purpose. Pharaoh (certainly not God's elect) is a case in point: "I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (Romans 9:17 quoting Exodus 9:16).

Exodus tells us that Pharaoh was guilty of hardening his heart, but many more times we are told that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and *that* is Paul's emphasis in Romans 9. With regard to Israel, God shows mercy. With regard to Pharaoh, God hardens. So then, "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18).

Pharaoh may vaunt himself against God's determination to be merciful to Israel, but in spite of himself, he is playing a part on

God's story. He is a prop on a stage where the drama centers on God. He is a foil to attract the world's attention to God's mighty acts of kindness toward Israel. Pharaoh stands within God's purpose even though his role is a disreputable one.

God's election or non-election of human beings issues from his independent will and decision. It has nothing to do with the relative moral value of either group, but it has everything to do with the part each is assigned in the realization of God's work in the world. Having freely chosen his human agents, God does not, through such choices, limit his freedom to choose unilaterally again, at any time.

Paul wants his perplexed countrymen to realize that this is precisely what has happened in their time. God has gone against what was expected of him. He has set his favor on a small company of Jews (those who believed the gospel; a

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The Benefit of Knowing the Bible

By Daniel Robinson

The Bible is the only source of absolute truth. *“Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).* Many interpret the word truth as something being factual. The original meaning of truth in Ancient Greek means un-concealment, or the revealing or bringing of what was previously hidden into the open.

The word of God, the Bible, does just that. It brings hidden things into the open. Until we give our lives to God, we are forever lost. Hidden things are the things that we do not see. *“For the word of God is sharper than any two edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).*

When we accept Christ as our Lord and savior, we are filled with the Holy Spirit. When we have the Holy Spirit, it guides and directs us. The word of God tells us that we are sheep; and as sheep, we know and recognize his voice because he is our shepherd. The word is taught and revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, and it helps us discern between the soul and the spirit. It helps us when our soul may be calling us to move away from the calling of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, *“I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through me” (John 14:6).* Despite this instruction from Christ, we aimlessly walk through this life in search of truth. The stark reality is it can be found in the Bible. It cleanses us and talks to us personally. *“But these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).*

Without Christ, we have the fear of death; with Christ, we have no fear for we have eternity with Him. What a comfort we have in Jesus for he is our comforter. *“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth” (Psalm 119:103).*

It is an interesting fact that so many Christians say they read the bible but 48% could not name the four Gospels and 68% couldn't name five of the Ten Commandments. To illustrate this truth, I share with you this story about a new pastor who

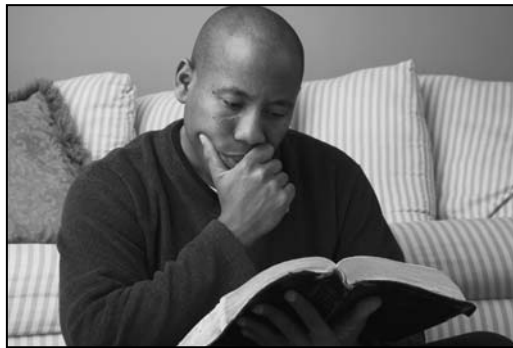
was asked to teach junior high boys Bible school class in the absence of the regular teacher.

The pastor decided to test the knowledge of the students, so he asked, “Who knocked down the walls of Jericho?” All of the boys denied doing it, and the pastor was angered by their ignorance. When the next church leader’s meeting came, he told of the experience. “Not one of them knows who knocked down the walls of Jericho.” The group was silent until a man spoke up: “Preacher, this seems to be bothering you, but I have known these boys for a long time and these are good boys. If they say they didn’t know, I believe them. Let’s just take some money out of the maintenance fund to fix the walls, and leave it at that.”

This is a sad commentary that unfortunately reflects the lack of Biblical knowledge that permeates our Christian world today. This lack of knowledge of the Bible by Christians reminds me of this verse from the Second Book of Timothy. *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).*

Charles Spurgeon’s admonition and warning to all of us: “If God has spoken, listen! If God has recorded his words in a book, search its pages with a believing heart. If you do not accept it as God’s inspired word, I cannot invite you to pay any articulate attentions of it: but if you regard it as the word of God, I charge you, as I shall meet you at the judgment seat of Christ. Study the Bible daily. Treat not the Eternal Word of God with disrespect, but delight in His word.” Read your bible, love your bible!”

The word of God is a map that speaks directly to us. By not reading it, we deny the powers of the Spirit to use the Word to perfect us. In so many instances in my life I have been directed by the Holy Spirit when reading the Bible. This leads me to the unmistakable conclusion that the Bible is alive and living. Just as it has spoken to our forefathers, it speaks to us. Today, more than ever, we need guidance and direction. Thank God for his infallible Word.



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remnant chosen by grace 11:7) along with large numbers of Gentiles who have turned to God through faith in Jesus. This multi-ethnic company, diverse of culture from the pagan world, is now the people of God, the sacred community, the bearer of his promises. They are the chosen ones.

As for the majority of Israelites, they are described variously thus: hardened (11:25), rejected (11:14), cut off (11:19), under the severity of God (11:22). These expressions leave no doubt that, at the time Paul was writing to the church at Rome, God had acted with regard to most of Israel, just as he had acted with regard to Esau.

Now, in the twenty-first century, Christians rejoice in the favor and blessing of God cannot escape the implications of Paul’s thought. Those who, in the wisdom and mercy of God, are recipients of God’s sponsorship do not for that reason have any claim on God or any of his benefits. No noble tradition, no record of service, no line of succession directs God’s sovereign appointments.

Well might we say that God raised up our people, our church, our movement or our institution: but none of that means that God is in so deep with us now that he can’t get out. He can and he will if he chooses. We need him. He doesn’t need us. He is able to create children for Abraham out of the very stones of the ground (Matthew 3:9).

Well might we sing, “God gave this land to me.” That doesn’t mean he is not free to give it to someone else. This is God’s world. He is the great shepherd and we are only the flock of his pasture. God is the supreme disposer. He is the potter, we are the clay. He is able to *“make out of the same lump of clay, some pots for noble purposes, and some for common use (Romans 9:21).* God is never in debt to us. *“Who has ever given to God that God should repay him” (Romans 11:35).* If, in his dealings, God happens to surprise us; if the first should be made last, and the last made first, his promises remain true. He is not unjust. He never has, and never will, let anyone down.