

The Jesus Factor

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 15:7-13

Note: Much of this sermon came from the good work of my former colleague Mike Abma.

Tonight's sermon will be more of a Bible study than usual, and it will focus on an unusual question. I want to look at how Paul used the Old Testament in his writings.

In the passage I'm about to read, Paul quotes 4 different Old Testament texts. He quotes them as supporting his argument that the gospel is for Gentiles and not just Jews, and that Gentiles and Jews should accept each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Now I know that most of you didn't come here tonight with that question burning in your heart. I know most of you haven't been lying awake at night tossing and turning, saying to yourself, "How did Paul use the Old Testament?" But bear with me. As we look at this admittedly academic question, we will learn something about how to read the Bible properly...which is REALLY important. And you will learn something about the difference Jesus makes for all of us.

In the passage I will read, Paul is making the case that, because of Jesus and his cross, both Gentiles and Jews should be part of the church. Because of the righteousness that Jesus offers on the cross, Gentiles and Jews should accept each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. At this point in the letter, Paul is making the argument that this was always God's plan! God always meant for Gentiles and Jews to join together in the church. In these verses, Paul cites 4 Old Testament passages to support his point.

Let's read what he says, and as I read, listen for the four Old Testament quotes. After I'm done with the passage, leave your Bibles ready, because we are going to use them.

Read Romans 15:7-13

So Paul's argument is that God always intended to make the Gentiles part of his people and he uses 4 Old Testament texts to make the argument. Let's look at these four references. Let's not just read the small bit that Paul quotes; let's read the whole thing in its context and see what Paul does with these passages.

Psalm 18

Let's start with the first Old Testament reference at the end of verse 9.

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;

I will sing the praises of your name."

This is a quote from Psalm 18:49. As you are turning there, let me remind you that Paul quotes from the Greek version of the Old Testament which was called the Septuagint. Our version of the Old Testament comes from the original Hebrew text, so while the versions are largely the same, you do notice small differences. Psalm 18 is a Psalm of God the warrior. The whole psalm celebrates God as a divine warrior who crushes his enemies and wins great victories for his people.

Paul quotes verse 49, but to get a sense of context, let's start reading at verse 42, where the Psalmist is talking about his enemies. As I read, ask yourself if this sounds like a passage which predicts the inclusion of other nations in God's family.

⁴²I beat them (my enemies) as fine as
windblown dust;
I trampled them like mud in the streets.
⁴³You have delivered me from the attacks of
the people;
you have made me the head of nations.
People I did not know now serve me,
⁴⁴foreigners cower before me;
as soon as they hear of me, they obey me.
⁴⁵They all lose heart;
they come trembling from their strongholds.

⁴⁶The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock!
Exalted be God my Savior!
⁴⁷He is the God who avenges me,
who subdues nations under me,
⁴⁸who saves me from my enemies.
You exalted me above my foes;
from a violent man you rescued me.
⁴⁹Therefore I will praise you, Lord, among the
nations;
I will sing the praises of your name.

So, what is the overall context of this Psalm? This is clearly a psalm of military victory, over the other nations, military victory over the Gentiles. It doesn't seem like a psalm of warm Gentile acceptance. Just look at verse 44-45: The foreigners lose heart, they cower, they tremble. And in verse 42 the Psalmist dreams of beating them to windblown dust. Even verse 49, the verse which Paul quotes, it seems like the Psalmist is the one praising God's name among the nations. It's not clear at all that the other nations are joining in.

Deuteronomy 32:43 - Let's go to quote number 2.

"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people"; this sounds more promising. It sounds more like an invitation for the Gentiles to praise God. But now, let's check out its source. It is from Deuteronomy 32:43. While you are looking that up, let me say a word about this passage. This verse is the very last verse of the song of Moses. Moses sang this song just as he was about to enter the land of Canaan, and in the land of Canaan they were instructed to destroy all the other nations. In the land of Canaan, the Gentiles were the enemy. Deuteronomy 7 says, "Drive out many nations before you... you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them and show them no mercy." So that's the broad context of Deuteronomy. Now let's read the passage starting at verse 39. The Israelites were just about to invade the Promised Land.

³⁹"See now that I myself am he!
There is no god besides me.
I put to death and I bring to life,
I have wounded and I will heal,
and no one can deliver out of my hand.
⁴⁰I lift my hand to heaven and solemnly swear:
As surely as I live forever,
⁴¹when I sharpen my flashing sword
and my hand grasps it in judgment,
I will take vengeance on my adversaries

and repay those who hate me.
⁴²I will make my arrows drunk with blood,
while my sword devours flesh:
the blood of the slain and the captives,
the heads of the enemy leaders."
⁴³Rejoice, you nations, with his people,
for he will avenge the blood of his servants;
he will take vengeance on his enemies
and make atonement for his land and people"

So, in its original context is this passage a word of warm acceptance to the Gentiles? No. It's a song celebrating their utter destruction. It celebrates their blood flowing in such a way that their blood shed in vengeance will make atonement for the land and its people. Other translations – the ESV and the NRSV - say that the spilt blood of these Gentile enemies will cleanse the land so that Israel can live in it. If the nations are called to rejoice, it is a terrified rejoicing, not a warm acceptance.

Psalm 117 - Let's move on to quotation number 3. "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him." That's from Psalm 117:1. Let's read the whole Psalm.

¹“Praise the Lord, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.
²For great is his love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
Praise the Lord”

I think this time the context and the quote clearly fit Paul’s purposes. The Psalm is calling all nations to praise and extol the Lord.

Isaiah 11 - Now the last Old Testament quotation. “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope.”
The original context is found in Isaiah 11:10-11.

¹⁰“In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples;
the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.
¹¹ In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the Mediterranean.”

If we were to keep reading to the end of Isaiah 11, we would see that this new king, this root of Jesse, would come and gather the remnant of Israel and Judah from among the nations. The picture is that God’s people Israel are scattered in every land and this person, this root of Jesse will be raised up as a banner before the nations. The people of Israel who are scattered throughout the nations will see that banner and they will rally to it. They will come home. So...It’s not the nations coming to the banner. It’s the people of Israel coming out from the nations to the banner. The Jews are being separated from the Gentiles. In fact, go down to verses 13 and 14 and you still have images of the nations being defeated and destroyed.

Where are we?

In three out of four of these passages, the way Paul quotes the Old Testament seems to go in a different direction from the context of the original passage. What’s going on here? Is Paul just playing fast and loose? Is he bad at quoting the Bible? No. Paul is not ignoring the context; Paul is reading the Bible differently because of Jesus.

For Paul, Jesus changes everything. Jesus changed how he saw himself – not a hero of righteousness, a Pharisee of pharisees, but an ordinary person saved by grace. Jesus changed the way he looked at Gentiles – not unclean enemies, but brothers and sisters in Christ. And Jesus changed the way he read his Bible. All these Bible passages that he’d known his whole life: he thought he understood them, he thought he knew what they meant, now in the light of Jesus and his cross they looked totally different. For Paul, Jesus becomes the lens for his life.

Watching Paul read these Old Testament passages teaches us how to read the Old Testament. We must read these passages through the Jesus lens. That’s a phrase used by Michael Williams in his book on the whole Bible. He stresses that a Christian does not read his Bible correctly until he starts to read every passage in the light of Jesus. You’ve got let the grace of the cross and the miracle of the resurrection pass over every Old Testament to see what it reveals. Williams says, “Reading the Bible through the Jesus lens means reading it the way it was intended.” The New Testament supports him on this! In John 5:39 Jesus is talking to the Jewish leaders about their Bible and he says to them, “These very scriptures (the Old Testament) testify about me.”

If you want to read the Old Testament correctly, you’ve got let the grace of the cross and the miracle of the resurrection pass over every passage. That becomes especially important when you

read these Old Testament passages about bloodshed, and purifying the land, violence, and revenge and crushing your enemy. When you read those passages you have to ask yourself, what does the death of Jesus, and the blood of Jesus and the sacrifice of Jesus have to say about how God works out this vengeance and this bloodshed?

That's what we see Paul doing in these passages! Psalm 18 talks about the nations trembling before him, cowering before him? Paul has seen how that works out in Christ. He's seen how the Philippian jailer came trembling into the prison after the earthquake set him and Silas free. And he knows that trembling led to the jailer's baptism and salvation!

Deuteronomy 32 talks about the blood of the defeated nations flowing over the land cleansing it, making atonement for the land and its people. Hold up the cross and you realize that Jesus was the one who was slain, his blood was poured out and made atonement for us and the land, cleansed us.

Isaiah 11 talks about a banner lifted up for the nations which will draw God's people. Turns out that banner was the cross. As Jesus himself said in John 12 "when I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself." Turns out that when the banner was lifted up not only did the remnant of Israel come, but the nations followed right after.

Does the fulfillment we have in Jesus seem to be more wonderful and gracious than you might ever predicted from these passages? Yes! Of course! But Paul would say, that's Jesus! This is exactly what's so great about Jesus! He is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine! His grace is bigger, his love is stronger!

We need to hold up Jesus to all Bible texts. When we fail to do that, when you read the Old Testament without Jesus, bad things happen

In South Africa in the 1830's a big group of Dutch settlers – Afrikaners - went on something called the Great Trek. You can read about it in James Michener's book the Covenant. They moved from an area in southern South Africa where they were in conflict with the British settlers and went to settle new lands in the North. They used the Old Testament to understand their journey. They saw it as a new Exodus ordained by God. They were the chosen Israelites heading toward the land of promise. The African tribes who were already there were the Canaanites. Because they were the Canaanites, they should be utterly purged from the land, according to scripture. Thousands and thousands of tribesmen were killed. They also believed, based on their reading of the Bible that they needed to maintain racial purity. After all, didn't the Old Testament law forbid intermarriage with the people of the nations! This policy became the fore-runner of apartheid, a policy of racial divide that was in effect until the 1980's.

This is what happens when people don't read the Bible through the Jesus lens. Jesus has broken down the dividing all of hostility. There is no Jew or Gentile – all are one in Christ Jesus. No modern nation is Israel. Jesus has started a new Israel, a new people of God, the church, and in the church there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free for all are one in Christ Jesus. Jesus fulfills Moses and he doesn't come to kill, he comes to lay down his life. The church is the fulfillment of Israel and we do not ride out with a sword to purify the wicked, we go out and meet them with a message of grace and forgiveness and new life. Jesus changes everything.

In this season of Lent, where we turn our face to his cross, may his grace and his forgiveness and his love be our frame, our lens. May he change the way we see our Bible. May he change the way we see our neighbor. May he change the way we see ourselves. May he change the way we see the world