

# Christian Holidays #18

*by: Ronald L. Dart*

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Many years ago, before I learned better about arguing religion, I got engaged in discussion with a fellow about heaven and hell and salvation. I had a problem with his beliefs and he had a problem with mine. He believed that everyone goes to heaven or hell immediately when they die, and there were no intermediate categories of people, and no stops along the way, you go straight to hell or straight to heaven at death, and that's all there is to it.

Not only that, but he believed that only those who accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, with full knowledge, would go to heaven and the rest would go to hell. Now you may say that sounds a great deal like what you believe, but let's talk about it.

## **Hell Is A Tough Proposition**

Hell in his belief system is a tough proposition. In hell one is tormented by fire, and not for a few hours until he dies, nor for few days, no not even for a few years, hell is forever.

I heard one preacher give an illustration and he said, "Imagine if you will, a mountain of granite, a mile high and a mile in diameter at the base, and once every year a little sparrow flies to that peak and proceeds to sharpen his beak. When that little bird has finally worn that mountain of granite one mile high at its peak and one-mile wide at its base, all the way down to little pebble that it can carry off in its beak, one day of eternity will have passed. For some people, according to the way they believe the Bible, there will be some people who will have spend eternity in hell in complete torment.

Now here was my problem. My granddad was a salty old fellow. I don't know if he ever went to church a day in his life. He was known on occasion to use a little bad language. He smoked and a few things like that, but overall he was a pretty good sort. He took me fishing a lot. We camped out together by a campfire on the banks of the river and got up every hour or two and ran trout lines all night and fished most of the morning until I went to sleep on him.

Now if you want to tell me that my granddad, old J.D., can't go to heaven because he didn't meet some standard of religious actions, I can live with that. But there's no system of human logic that can see any justice in tormenting old J.D. with fire and brimstone for all eternity. There is something wrong with this picture. I will say however, old J.D. at least knew who Jesus Christ was, it is just that it didn't make much difference to him

My discussion with the gentleman in question focused on people who never even heard the name of Jesus any time in their lives. How could it be right for God to torture these people forever? Tell me he's going to leave him dead, and we have one sort of thing to deal with. Tell me that He is arranged for their eternal torment, and we have another one altogether. Most people believe that hell is something that has apparently been created, designed and planned for people and for their torment forever.

Then, there are the children and I asked him, "If all of these people, including countless children, who never had a chance to be saved, what about these people?" And then he said something truly astonishing. He said "Well if they never had a chance to be saved then they are saved." Now I was flabbergasted, so I wondered and I said "Why does your church send missionaries to these people, to give them a chance to be lost?" Because our conversation had been going on for a while about the why's and wherefore's of churches that believe that people out there in India, the people in Africa, and wherever they are, are going to go to hell and burn for all eternity.

How come we spend all this time in our Wednesday night business meetings in church, spending money on air-conditioning and improving the decor and new stain glass windows and taller steeples and all this kind of stuff, if we really believe that people are going to burn in hell for all eternity because we didn't get a missionary out there to them.

There is an inconsistency in all this and I hope that you can see that. Well, that ended my discussion with him.

Later I had another discussion with my sister-in-law. We made our way through the same sort of discussion to the point where one has to deal with the question of the salvation of people who never had a chance to be saved in his life and, particularly with children. She knew as well as I did, that you can't postulate a God who will torment people forever and ever who never had a chance. Any intelligent person will have problems with that

She thought about it for a moment and then she concluded, "Well, I believe that God will make a way." And in that we finally found agreement because so do I.

But I think it would be strange indeed if in all of the pages of the Bible, we couldn't find so much as a hint as to what that way is. I'm not so sure that I would have ever seen it if it were not for the fact, that many years ago I began observing the holidays of the Bible.

### **Holidays of the Bible**

I decided that you couldn't find Christmas and Easter and these other holidays of the world in the Bible, so what holidays were there? And I found some. They are what the Bible calls the feasts of the Lord, literally the appointments of Jehovah. Most people call them Jewish holidays, but I found, much to my surprise, that they are just as Christian as the Lord's Supper. It is just that people haven't been paying attention, and more important, they are

revelatory to the plan of God and His broad purpose and its broad outlines. In one of those holidays I found my hint as to what God's way of salvation might be for those who had never had a chance.

### **Will I See My Loved Ones Again?**

One thing I found was this is not a new question, it has been around for a long time. I know that a lot of people have shed a lot of tears, have laid awake long nights many times worrying about loved ones who have gone ahead of them, who have already died without accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Savior or without some degree of a religious movement in their life that somehow you could say that this person will not go to hell and they will go to heaven, or I will have a chance of seeing them again. Even apart from the idea of going to hell and burning forever, the question of the loss of a loved one, the loss of a chance of ever seeing them again can really be tormenting to people.

### **The Jews Rejected the Gospel**

The apostle Paul struggled with the same question, but he struggled with it at a slightly different level. Paul, you see, traveled all over the Roman Empire and every time he would go to a new city, he would go first to the synagogue and he would preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. And everywhere, most of the Jews, with very few exceptions, just rejected the gospel. This troubled Paul a lot and I can see why it would. Here is something that you have learned, something you have seen, you have met this man and heard him speak with your own ears, and you have seen him with your own eyes. You know that Jesus Christ died and was buried and was resurrected.

Paul, not apart from his own experiences, had researched it. So he comes into the synagogue absolutely convinced of Jesus Christ's Messiahship, who He is and what He was all about and he preaches it with all the fervor of his being to blank faces and hostile faces. Once or twice he got himself stoned for preaching this gospel and to him there was something profoundly wrong with this picture.

He addressed the matter in an important letter that he wrote to the Romans. There's no particular reason why it crops up in this letter, it just does. I've gone back and looked at the context and wondered why Paul decided to make this statement in Romans. It is a long one and it runs about three chapters, and the only conclusion I could come to is that it was bothering him and because it was bothering him, he had to talk about it.

Now Paul's style is elliptical, that is to say, he leaves a lot of things unsaid that he thinks will be understood by his readers. Unfortunately, not many modern readers of the New Testament have the background in the Old Testament, to quickly grasp what Paul is talking about

The book of Romans, I think, has 46 direct citations out of the Old Testament and they are taken out of the Old Testament out of context so unless you know the pattern that is being developed in the Old Testament, you will tend to miss what Paul's driving at here.

Paul is a difficult study in some cases and no more so than he is in this ninth, tenth and eleventh chapters of the book of Romans which is the area that I stumbled to and began to understand, that this is not new. My being troubled with this is not fresh on the horizon. Paul worried about it right from the start.

### **What Is Going To Happen to The Jews?**

What on earth, Paul wondered, is going to happen to the Jews? These were God's people. They knew who God was. They had kept His Laws and they had tried their best to be faithful to God and for some reason, that Paul couldn't fathom, they were rejecting the gospel of Christ out of hand and it bothered him. It would bother me too.

Paul wrote to the Romans, and he said in chapter 9 verse one, "I am going to tell you the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit." This is a little bit unusual, because what he's doing here, is that he's giving you a three fold affirmation that what he's about to tell you is the truth, which means and he thinks, you're not going to think it is the truth when he tells you. "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit (2) "That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. {3} For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." It was that bad. He said, "If it would help, if there was any way that it would make a difference I would even be willing to be cut off from Christ." It was a great heaviness for Paul and a continual sorrow to him that all these people, who were God's people, were continually turning their back on the core and heart of the gospel of Christ.

Paul continued in verse four, "These are Israelites, to whom pertains the adoption, the glory, the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; {5} Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever." So what's going on here?

Continuing in verse 6, Paul said it's "Not as though the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel, who are of Israel: {7} Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall your seed be called. {8} That is, They who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed." Now I'll be the first to admit that's a very difficult long sentence that he is giving you here, but what he's driving at here is the word of God is taken effect because the Israel that God is talking about are those people who believe, not the people who are born of the flesh genetically Israelites. So he says, at least the word God is working and there is an Israel of God and there are children of Abraham but they're not genetically children of Abraham, they are spiritually the children of Abraham.

Then Paul goes on to say in verse 9, "This is the word of promise, At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son. {10} And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; {11} (The children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calls;) {12} It was said to her, The elder shall serve the younger. {13} As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated."

### **God Loves Jacob and Hates Esau**

Now this is troubling, but it is very important. All the way back in the history of one man's family, God looked down upon a woman who was pregnant and had twins inside her and God before either one of these boys were born, He established one principle that was important for all mankind to understand down through all ages that this is not a question of merit. This is a question of God's choice. The elder shall serve the younger. I'm going to love Jacob and I'm not going to love Esau. And so history was fulfilled.

Now this is troubling because while we are all willing to admit that God is sovereign, while we are all willing to say that God can do whatever he wants to do, you still have to kind of wonder, why would one person be favored in this way, and another person rejected without even so much as a chance to do good or to do evil?

Paul goes on to say in verse 14, "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. {15} For he said to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."

And folks, I can say to God, "Look, you are God, and I can accept that and I will accept it, I'm not going to argue with you. I can't lift up my voice and argue with God, but I will to have be honest with you and tell you, if we are talking about this life then I don't understand it. If it is merely a question, if it is the rejection of one man in the acceptance of another, it is final, not only for this life but for all eternity, it is problematic, but if it is for this life and if there is more beyond this life, then maybe there is something more to this that we need to understand.

### **Has God Hardened Me?**

Paul says in verse 16, "It is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but it is God that shows mercy. {17} For the scripture said to Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. {18} Therefore he has mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardens."

I don't mind telling you, I remember when I was a teenager and having read this and sitting there wondering, "Well am I one who God has hardened and how would I know, and what hope is there for me if he has? What is there out there in life and looking at it from another

perspective, if you had a father or a mother or a brother or sister, whom you love dearly and God had hardened them, does that mean that they're lost to you forever on an arbitrary decision made by God? Or is there something we don't understand?

You know, I am persuaded, as I read through Paul here in the ninth chapter of Romans, that Paul only saw this thing, to use his words, through a glass darkly. He had an idea of what God was doing and in fact, it is my impression in reading through this that the idea of what God was actually doing was growing on Paul as he went through following the theology, following his experiences and piecing what he knew of the Scriptures together with what was actually happening on the ground, he was just beginning to see what God had in mind for man.

Now Paul asks in verse 19, "You are going to say to me, Why does he find fault? Who hath resisted his will? {20} No but, O man, who are you to reply against God?"

I'm grateful for this because if Paul hadn't give me this warning I might as well sit around saying "What is the point? What is there that I can do? Does it really make any difference what I can do?"

"No," Paul says, "Who are you to reply against God, shall the thing formed say to him who formed it, why have you made me this way? {21} Doesn't he have power over the clay, of the same lump so to honor and another to dishonor."

Well, yes and I can accept that, but what if I'm one of those made for dishonor.?

What if God, Paul asks in verse 22, "Willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much patience the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction."

Yes, God can do that. But what if I'm one of them?

Verse 23, "And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, whom he had afore prepared unto glory, {24} Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?"

That's good, but I really hope I'm in the latter category, and not the former. But what about those people whom I have loved who are going to be in the former category, what about them?

### **A Remnant Shall Be Saved**

Paul continues in verse 25, "As he said also to Hosea, I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. {26} And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, You are not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God. {27} Isaiah also cried concerning Israel, Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved: {28} For

he will finish the work, and cut it short in righteousness: because a short work will the Lord make upon the earth."

### **What About The Rest of Them?**

So the theme comes through, though the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea and a remnant shall be saved. What about the rest? What is going to happen to them? Are they just lost? This was bothering Paul. He's working his way around this question, with the full realization that as far as his life is concerned, some are saved and some are lost and there's not a whole lot that you and I can do about it

Paul continues in verse 29, "Isaiah has said before, "Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we had been as Sodom, and been made like Gomorrah. {30} What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith. {31}"But Israel, who followed after the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness."

You know you have to say of some of these people, they did their best, but why didn't they make it?

Verse 32, "Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone; {33} As it is written, Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offence: and whosoever believes on him shall not be ashamed."

But what Paul is struggling with and what you and I struggle with is, what about the rest of them?

Paul starts the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans by stating the firmest terms, in the most heartfelt terms his desire, he said, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. {2} For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. {3} For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God."

The first thing to note about this is these are not bad people, Paul says, that they are good people, and in their ignorance they have gone about trying to establish their own righteousness, and they haven't understood, or been able to grasp the righteousness of God.

Now are we going to punish these people forever because they were good people who did the best they knew under the circumstances that they had, but were ignorant of the righteousness of God, because that is basically what some people say is going to happen to them.

It is troubling and Paul goes on with the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans to establish as clearly as anyone could establish, the principle and the fundamental concept of salvation by grace, as

opposed to salvation by works. This is something I think is pretty well understood throughout the Christian faith.

### **Has God Cast Away His People?**

Paul makes the point, and then he comes down to Romans Chapter 11 and he says this, "I say then, Has God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. {2} God has not cast away his people which he foreknew"

Now, what are we to make of all this? What Paul has done at the end of chapter 10 verses 20 and 21, is to tell us that "God was found of the Gentiles who didn't look for him. He was made manifest to them that ask not after him." To Israel, He says "All day long I have stretched forth my hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people." Well, what are they, disobedient and gainsaying or merely ignorant, not understanding? What is going to happen to them?

Paul says, "Has God cast them away? "No," he says, "However, they had to come to understand it"

Paul now says in Chapter 11 of Romans, "Don't you know what the Scriptures said of Elijah? how he makes intercession to God against Israel, saying, {3} Lord, they have killed our prophets, and torn down your altars; and I am left alone, and they are trying to kill me. What is the answer from God to him? {4} "I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. {5} Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace."

### **What About The Rest of Them?**

And so Paul understands, among all the Israelites, there is a remnant, but that's not the question. The question is what about the rest of them?

It says in verse seven, " Israel has not obtained that which he seeks for; but the election has obtained it, and the rest were blinded {8} (According as it is written, God has given them a spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day."

The question that you and I struggle with is, is this fair? Is it really right for God to cut these people off, to blind them so that they cannot understand, and then destroy them forever? I mean, either never raise the dead at all or raise them up in judgment and burn them in the Lake of fire or worse torment them for a thousand years, or for a million years or for all eternity.



Paul asks in Romans 11 and verse 11, "I say then, Have all of these Israelites stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come to the Gentiles, to provoke them to jealousy."

Now how does that work? Well, down through all the generations the Israelite religion has been just that, an Israelite religion. In many ways, the Israelites had made Jehovah their own personal property, their own national property. The presumption was, we don't need to take the gospel to the Gentiles because He is our God, He is not theirs. This jealousy, this holding onto God, this xenophobia, I guess, of the Israelites had prevented the truth of God from going to the Gentiles. The answer is, they have to fall, it is only through their fall that salvation can go to the Gentiles.

Continuing in verse 12, "Now if the fall of the Israelites be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more will be their fullness?"

You see what Paul is implying by this is, yes, they fell, and it was for their benefit, but that's not the end. What's going to happen when the other side of this comes to pass. It's right here that we get our hint in verse 15, Paul says, "For if the casting away of Israel be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?"

You see, the problem is, not merely that we put all these Israelites away for a while so Gentiles could come in and then go back and get them later. What about the ones that have died in the process, for there would've been many. Paul answers the question this way, he said the casting away of them is a reconciling of the world. The receiving of them is life from the dead, and in the nature of the problem that we are dealing with here, Paul has sent up a little signal flag, and said, "Take a close look at this concept because the answer to it may be in the resurrection from the dead.

In verse 25. Paul says, "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part has happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles are come in. {26} And so all Israel shall be saved."

How? Well, that's a question that's going to have to wait until the next time. Until then, I am Ronald Dart and you were born to win.

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