

week 6 six



Read Romans Chapters Nine and Ten





Discover

“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Luke 15:25-32

Jesus’ tale of the Prodigal Son is the perfect scenario to guide our understanding of Paul’s conversation in Romans chapters nine through eleven. Paul begins this section by addressing the Jesus followers in Rome who are ethnically and once religiously Jewish. This smaller minority in the Gentile dominated church in Rome are experiencing an identity crisis. These Jewish Jesus followers grew in a religious context that emphasized their status as the chosen people of God, descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and heirs of the promises of Israel. This religious context equally emphasized that the Jews were a people uniquely set apart and distinct from all others, the Gentiles. The Jews crafted their identity by answering two critical questions: who are we AND who are we not? The older brother uses the differences between himself and his younger brother to emphasize his moral uprightness and status in the household. “These many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command...but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed a fattened calf for him!” Because of Jesus’ radical welcome, the Gentiles are invited back into God’s household just as the prodigal son finds his status as a son restored by his father. The Jewish Jesus followers in the church in Rome can no longer claim a special status in the eyes of God because of who they are not. The Gentiles are now their brothers and sisters. In Romans 10:12 Paul notes “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.” As Paul addresses these Jewish Jesus followers in chapters nine and ten, I sense the frustration and tension that Paul is combating within this portion of the church. It is the same frustration and tension that reverberates in the words of the older brother. What was the purpose for God’s special invitation to Israel threaded through the Hebrew Scriptures (The Old Testament)? Why did God promise faithfulness and care to the Jews for centuries only to extend an invitation to all of those who were the consistent enemies and oppressors of the people of God? I can hear the older brother’s exasperated question: Why did I remain faithful to my father if my faithfulness goes unrewarded and faithlessness is celebrated in this household?



Discover

Can you commensurate with the turmoil stirred in the hearts of these Jewish Jesus followers in Rome? Worship of God and observance of the commandments defined every aspect of the life of a Jew living in the hostile Roman Empire, an empire where power and influence resided in the hands of the Gentiles. The power shift in the church in Rome between the Jewish and Gentile Jesus followers mimics the imbalance in their larger societal structure. The inclusion of the Gentiles threatens the stability and status of the Jewish Jesus followers and they in turn question God's identity and purpose. Is God faithful? Does God keep his promises? Does God care for his children? A.W. Tozer says that "what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." The truth of Tozer's statement resonates in this section of Romans. The Jewish Jesus followers are clinging to an incomplete image of God. Is God faithful to Israel? Paul's answer is a resounding "Yes!" God is faithful, in fact, God is more faithful that you could imagine. God fulfilled his promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the sands of the sea by granting both physical and spiritual offspring to Abraham. "This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring." *Romans 9:8* Is God merciful? Paul's answer again is "Yes!" God is merciful and compassionate, in fact, God is more merciful and compassionate than you could imagine. God extended the same mercy he lavished on Israel despite centuries of their own unfaithfulness to the rest of humanity. God extended his great compassion to bless those who were once enemies of the Jews. "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." *Romans 9:14-16*

Speaking to these Jewish Jesus followers, Paul challenges their image of God. Their perspective is limited, their vision blurry. They can envision the God described in the words of Psalm 103 a God "who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases - who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion - who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's... [who] works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed." They can conjure this image of God but their image lavishes love and compassion and abundance on only a select few, on only those who are God's chosen people, on only the obedient and faithful of Jewish descent. Paul challenges this image of God and invites these Jewish Jesus followers to expand their vision, to extend their peripheral sight, and become aware that God's abundance reaches farther than they thought possible. Paul challenges this limited, incomplete, picture of God by lifting up the image of Jesus. Jesus is the most complete image of God. Jesus is the fullness of God revealed in human flesh. Jesus is the embodiment of God's generous invitation and "blesses all who call on him." Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah that "Anyone who believes in him [in Jesus] will never be put to shame." Paul reminds these Jewish Jesus followers that Jesus reveals that God is more than they could imagine. God is more. More faithful, more merciful, more loving, more inviting, more compassionate, God is more. How do you envision God? How do you picture God? Do the images in your mind mirror the character and attitude of Jesus?



Reflect

The following questions are designed to help you reflect more deeply on the themes we explore together as we journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. I invite you to make space to sit with these questions without any need for a quick or clear answer. As you settle into a quiet and comfortable space, I encourage you to discuss these questions with God. Ask God to prompt you, to guide your thoughts, or bring up new questions that could be more helpful to you.

1

Paul reminds the Jewish Jesus followers that throughout their history, God always proved faithful and kept his promises. Jesus' invitation to the Gentiles is the intended fulfillment of God's promise to provide offspring for Abraham as numerous as the sands of the sea. Consider your own story, are there moments or experiences that shifted your perspective on God's action or presence? What shifted in your image of God or your understanding of God's work in the world?

2

Like the envious older brother, the Jewish Jesus followers find it difficult to accept God's invitation to the Gentiles. Are there individuals or groups of people that you find it difficult to include in the family of God? Are there limits to God's invitation through Jesus?

3

Paul upholds Jesus as the complete image of God. Jesus' actions and attitude reflect God's intention for the world. Does your image of God reflect Jesus? Are there inconsistencies between your understanding of God and your understanding of Jesus?

4

What strikes you about the statement that God is more? Have you found this statement to be truthful?

