

Genesis 12: 1-9  
Psalm 33: 1-12  
Romans 4: 13-25  
St. Matthew 9: 9-13

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“For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”

Romans 4: 13

It doesn't take very long, when we're reading the New Testament, to see that a major issue in the first-century Church is the relationship between Jewish Christians, and Gentile Christians...

St. Paul and the other writers just took for granted that God was calling the Jewish people into a new kind of relationship with God. What was more surprising to them was that God was calling *everyone* – Jews and foreigners alike! – into this new relationship, based on faith in Jesus Christ himself. They took for granted that God was calling the Jewish nation – it was a surprise to some that God was calling anyone else!...

It didn't take long for the tables to be overturned, though... For most of Christian history, there has been a lot of criticism – even hatred – by Christians, against the Jewish people. Jews were blamed entirely for the torture and crucifixion of Jesus, and were often portrayed as stubborn or foolish...

Christians pay special attention to the teachings in the early Church, because the Holy Spirit speaks into our lives more fully when we are united together, than when we are divided. Yet, some of what the Christian teachers wrote from the 100s to the 500s about the Jews can be very painful for us to read today. (I'm not going to read any of the quotations – you can read them yourselves if you want, but the comments about the Jews by the early Christian fathers is generally very sad to read.)

This snobbish view of Jewish people was a thread throughout most of Christian history. For example, Martin Luther was a key figure in the Church reforms of the 1500's, but later in his life, some of Luther's comments about Jewish people are very distasteful... Right up to the regime in Nazi Germany in the 1920's and '30's, many Christians encouraged putting down the Jewish people – and there are still echoes of this view among some extreme right-wing groups, even today...

When the New Testament was being written, God's agency and love for the Jewish nation was taken for granted. Within a few generations, though, the thread of hostility *toward* Jewish people is a troubling frequent theme in the Church...

What about today?... I suspect for most of us, we don't think that much about Jewish people. If we do at all, we are likely sympathetic when Jewish people are persecuted, while at the same time, we can be saddened by all the fighting in and around Jerusalem...

Can we re-capture a more biblical view of the relationship between Jewish people, Christians, and the living God?...

There was a lot of emphasis on the practice of circumcising Jewish males, which might seem an odd spiritual practice for us today. (It might even make a few of us guys squirm a bit.) Let's remember, though, that circumcision was not an end in itself: Circumcision was a sign, or reminder, of what is taking place in a believer's life – it was a sign of God's covenant relationship, not only with individuals, but with a whole nation... Let's think of the sacraments: A little bit like the outward action of the waters of baptism are a sign of God's inward work in a person's life, so too circumcision was intended to be a reminder of God's people belonging to God, individually and together...

St. Paul explains it this way in Romans 2:

For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

Circumcision is a sign, or a reminder, of God's covenant relationship with the Israelites...

God's covenant relationship with his ancient people is the theme of our Old Testament and Epistle readings this morning... Let's remember way back in history, when a wealthy older Middle Eastern farmer (his name was Abram) was concerned, because Abram and his wife Sarai had no heir. Long before there were government pensions, elderly folk depended on their children to take care of them in their old age. (Whether it was Abram and his wife Sarai, or Manoah and his wife in Judges, or Zechariah and Elizabeth in the New Testament, not being able to have children was a real worry, and was sometimes thought to be a cause for shame...)

So there is Abraham – looking for new pastures for his flocks, looking after his household, praying faithfully to God; but seemingly, not getting any answers. Then, one day, God speaks powerfully into Abram's life: Abram will have a son (we later learn the son's name is Isaac). In fact, Abram will be re-named "Abraham;" the "Ancestor of a Multitude..." It is a very powerful event in God's work in the world: The God above all gods takes the initiative to enter into a covenant relationship with this one faithful man, Abraham... In return, Abraham and his descendants are to worship God alone, and to serve him. By remaining within this covenant relationship, their lives will be blessed...

One way of reading the entire Old Testament is to see it as a collection of stories, of God's faithfulness towards his people; and their times of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, individually and together... So we have this strong woven theme of God's initiative, with a people in a special relationship with himself...

The story of God's covenant relationship is the root of our own story – the Christian story – you see. This covenant relationship is something we need to appreciate and to embrace...

Christians believe that we are still in a covenant relationship with God. This new covenant relationship has been introduced by Jesus Christ. We are still expected to keep the *moral* laws of the Hebrew scriptures – the Ten Commandments, for instance, are still binding on Christians. But we are no longer required to keep the old ceremonial, ritual, and political laws. Jesus Christ has introduced a *new* covenant relationship. Our Lord spoke these words, recorded on the night of his betrayal:

‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15: 12-17)

Jesus Christ introduces a new covenant relationship, through himself. God has taken the initiative, and we’re invited to respond, to be drawn into this new covenant relationship...

Remember our Lord’s words of institution at his meal, the eucharistic sacrament: “And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’ (Luke 22: 20)”

To take one more example, all of our Bibles usually have an inscription like this, on the page before Matthew 1: “The New Covenant, commonly called the New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” It’s very clear – Christians are still under a covenant relationship with God; it is introduced through Jesus Christ...

It is surely obvious, that there ought to be no room, *anywhere* in the Christian Church, to put down our Jewish forebearers. In fact, we ought not to put down *anyone*... Yet, we can still uphold the wonder and the mercy shown to the world through Jesus Christ...

In his atheist phase as a young adult, the writer C. S. Lewis had to defend the view that all religions had gotten it all wrong, all the time. Writing later in his life, Lewis observed, “When I became a Christian, I could take a more liberal view” (that is, a more generous view)...

Christians don’t need to put down people of other religions, or people of no religion at all. Rather, we are called to *love them*, from the bottom of our hearts – and we should show our love, by what we say, and what we do. At the same time, it’s most appropriate that we give praise and honour to God through Jesus Christ. If people don’t want to know why following Christ is so vital to us, of course we respect other people’s decisions (even if we might not always agree)... On the other hand, if people are open to learning more about us, then it’s our privilege to share it: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (I Peter 3: 15; NIV)...

Thanks be to God for his mercy and faithfulness throughout the ages, in the Old Covenant and in the New Covenant. May we joyfully live our lives, in response to what the living God has done, for you; for me; and for all people.

Amen.