

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 10/28/2022

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

From time to time, I see bumper stickers that say, "GOD said it. I believe it. That settles it." I don't know how literally those who present this message mean it, but such a statement suggests that what they believe the Bible says is non-negotiable and not open to interpretation or discussion. Note that I said, "what they believe the Bible says," which may not be what it really says.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he quotes a number of passages from scripture, which for the Jews of his day was what we call the Old Testament. Those verses he cites present the message that GOD'S plan for the salvation of all people began with the Jews, and then would be shared by them with the rest of the world. For example, Paul quotes both II Samuel 22:50 and Psalm 18:49: "*Therefore I will praise YOU among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of YOUR name.*" That meant that the Jews would share their relationship with GOD with all people, or all nations, or with the Gentiles. Yet, as we read in the New Testament, the Jews believe Gentiles were unclean and you should not associate with them, lest you become unclean yourself. How could this have happened, that GOD'S plan to reach all people beginning with the Jews only went as far as the Jews and then stopped?

Often people start with what they believe the Bible says (and this is true in politics and other areas) and then find those messages that support their position but fail to look further. They choose not to wrestle with other passages that may seem to contradict or expand their understanding of what the Bible says. "GOD said it. I believe it. That settles it." It must have been very hard for the Jews who received Paul's letter to be told that they had been mistaken in how they understood GOD's plan. They all knew that GOD had made a covenant with Abraham saying, "*I will be your GOD, and you will be MY people.*" GOD later expanded that with Abraham saying, "*I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you...and all people on earth will be blessed through you.*" They remembered that they were GOD'S chosen people, and that GOD would bless them, but they kind of forgot (or ignored) that part about being a blessing to all people.

Martin Luther had been taught in the Roman Catholic church of which he was a monk that you had to earn GOD'S love and forgiveness. Luther would go to confession as often as five times a day, trying to admit all his sins so as to be able to do penance and feel forgiven. But usually, he didn't. He didn't know what he had missed, but there must have been something or else he would not have felt the sense of guilt and unworthiness that he did. Then his mentor, Johann von Staupitz, the Vicar General of the Augustinian friars in Germany of which Luther was a part, gave Luther the assignment to study the Letter to the Romans. In that letter, Luther found the words of Roman 3:23-24, 26: "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of GOD, and all are justified freely by HIS grace through the redemption that came by CHRIST JESUS...the ONE who justifies those who have faith.*" Suddenly, Luther understood GOD'S plan and not the one he had been taught by the Roman Catholic church. Justification or forgiveness comes through faith in JESUS CHRIST, and Luther always added "alone." It was such a revelation to him that he began to preach and teach about it, and 505 years ago this Monday, he posted his 95 Thesis which included a challenge to the idea that you had to earn forgiveness from GOD apart from faith. Such a change in the understanding of scripture shook Europe and the world in what we call the Reformation.

Bible study can open our eyes to better and broader understanding of what GOD intends for all people. That can be hard when we've been told one way to think for all of our lives and what we learn challenges that. The only way to move past that discomfort is to first make the commitment to be open to GOD'S possibilities through the study of scripture, and then second be willing to shed what we have previously believed in order to embrace GOD'S vision and will, rather than our own.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey