

September 9, 2012

Galatians 3:21-29 / I Peter 2:4-10 / Ephesians 3:1-13

Israel Redefined (#2): Believing Gentile and Believing Israel (as opposed to unbelieving Israel) as the Church, or God's One New People in Christ.

I was looking at the title of my sermon this past Wednesday and I realized that it needed a little tweaking! Because I shouldn't have said (as I did last week):
"The Church and Israel as God's one people in Christ."

Rather, I should have said (as in the corrected form in this week's bulletin):
Believing Gentile and Believing Jew as the Church, or the Israel of God, or
God's One New People in Christ. Not a huge change, but then again,
inaccuracy is never good, so I do apologize.

Now, as we move on to look at our text for today, I need reiterate what I said last week about the importance of what Paul has been speaking about in these verses, since this week's text covers the exact same theme. The theme of how believing Gentiles have been joined or grafted into believing Israel, thus making both into the one body we call the Church. It's the pre-dominant theme of the entire book of Ephesians.

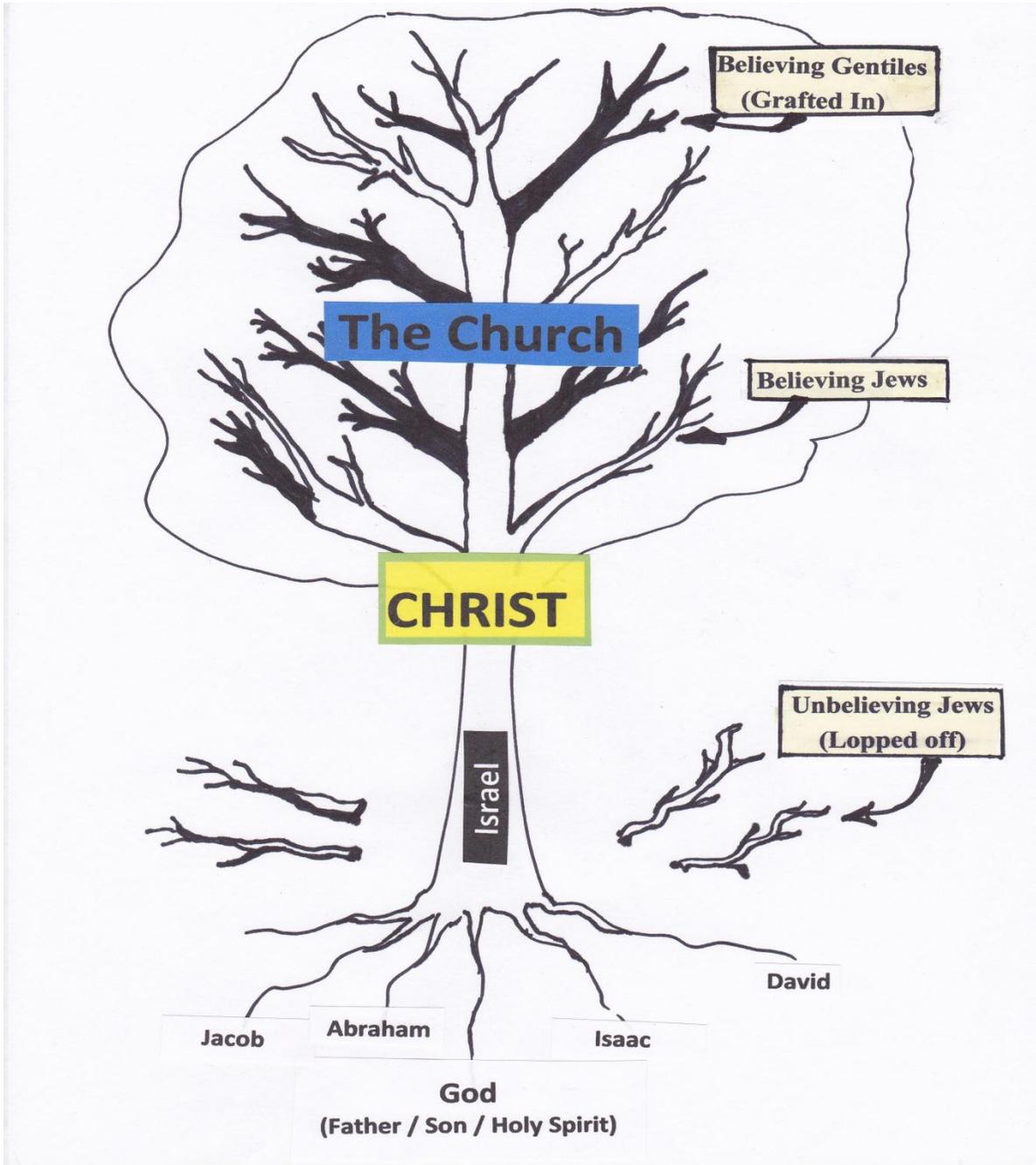
It takes up 5 verses of chapter 1 (vv. 9-14) / 12 verses in chapter 2 (vv. 11-22) / all 21 verses in chapter 3 (as I will show you today and from vv. 14-21 next week) / and finally two verses of chapter 6 (vv. 19-20).

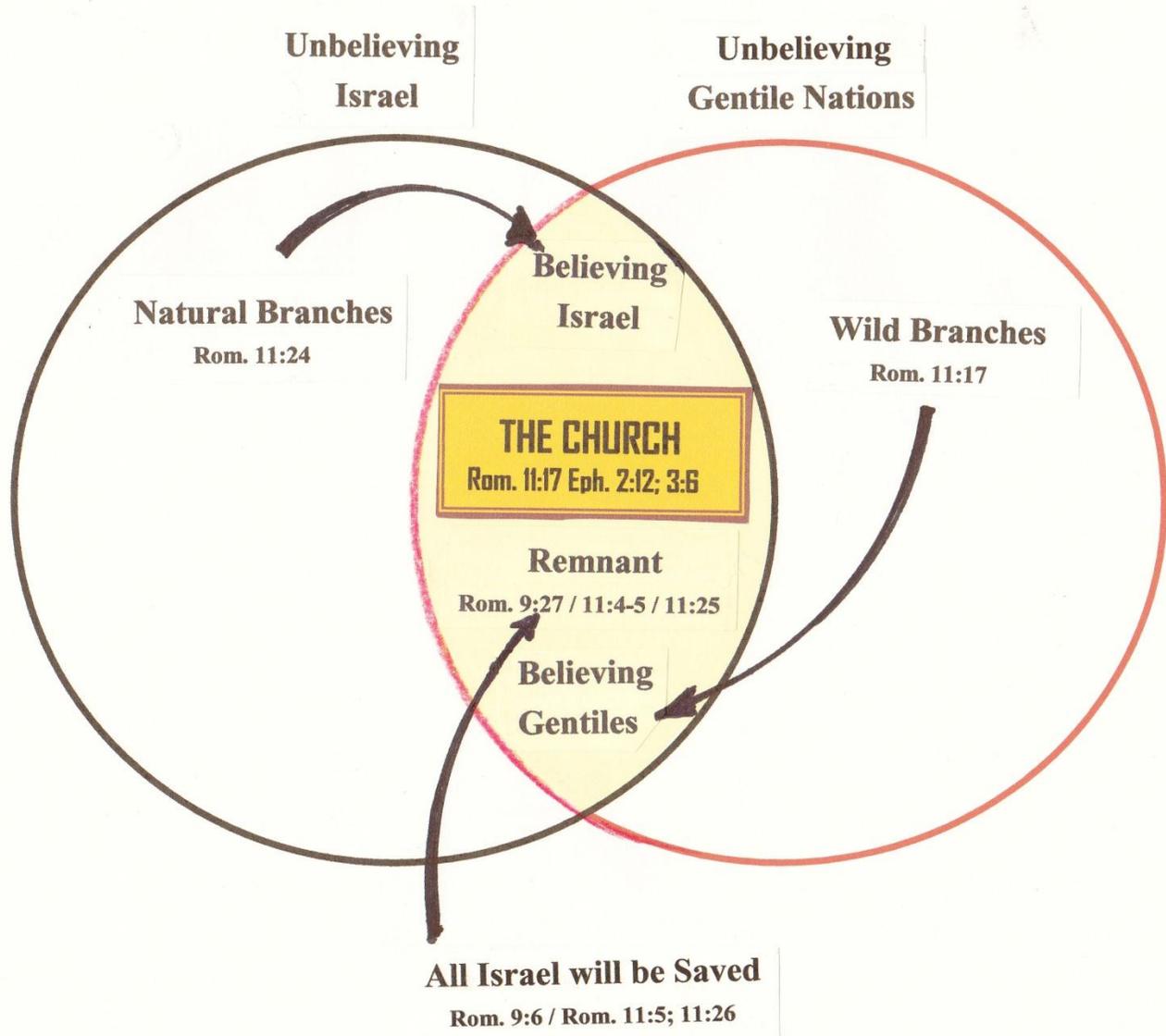
That's 40 verses out of 154, or roughly just over a quarter of the entire book! To no other theme in Ephesians does Paul devote so much time or space.

Of course, another possible reason Paul devotes so much time to it could be that this is a new concept never alluded to in the OT / and also, what he calls a "mystery" -- "The mystery made known to him by revelation." (v. 3) "The mystery that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (v.6) / A "mystery," he says, "which was for ages past hidden in God," but has now been revealed, and thus must be, "made plain to everyone" (v. 9).

And I don't know about you, but if you're anything like me, you'll find that words or concepts are often much easier to grasp when we can see them put into diagram form. That's why I spent some time on Wednesday, diagramming this concept for you -- to show you visually what Paul is trying to explain verbally. / Hopefully they help (despite my lack of artistic ability)!

Keep them in mind as we progress through our text. (Explain Diagrams)





So, with those images in your mind, let's dig into our text and consider the **FIRST** thing Paul has to tell us, beginning in v. 1 where he writes: **"For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles..."** As it is, it's an incomplete sentence that never really gets finished. It looks back to the previous verses because he says, "For this reason," (that is, in light of what he's just told us in 2:11-22). But he never goes on to make his point. He just drops it and leaves it hanging in midair so to speak.

That's why some (and I am one of them) believe that the word "am" is both implied and should be inserted into the sentence. Then the verse would be complete, and make total sense in the context, and read: **"For this**

reason I, Paul, AM a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles."
 That is, he's a prisoner (in large part) precisely because he's been declaring this mystery, or this good news, or this Gospel that the Gentiles are now fellow citizen's with God's people and members of God's household.

With that the verse makes total sense and fits perfectly into the context. The reason Paul was in prison at this time, was because the unbelieving Jews did not like the message he was preaching about the Gentiles being joined to God's people, Israel. And worse yet, by grace through faith alone, without first having to be circumcised, or become a Jew, or fully embrace, and observe or obey the O.T. law. It was unheard of!

That, says Paul, is one of the major reasons he was in prison. Because he was teaching that in Christ Jesus, God had ***"destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh, the law, with its commandments and regulations."*** And thus, in essence -- to a Jew at least -- he was doing the unthinkable. He was making both believing Jew and believing Gentile to be one unified body of equally loved / equally favored / graciously chosen people / in Christ.

In other words, Paul was in prison for tearing down barriers between the Jews and Gentiles that the Jews didn't want torn down! He was uniting them to people they didn't want to be united to! (Sort of like the race riots here in the states during the 1960's, when whites fought (often with violence) the push for equality with blacks.

Paul would have known how they felt. For he was doing a similar thing -- seeking to reconcile in one body, as one people, as equal and without any distinction, both Jew and Gentile. Two groups of people, who as we saw last week, hated each other. Thus the Jews pushed to have Paul arrested by the Roman authorities for stirring up social strife and upsetting the peace of the Roman Empire wherever he went.

And it was true. He did. Acts makes it clear that pretty much everywhere he went, he stirred up trouble. Trouble most frequently instigated by those Jews, who not only rejected his message that Jesus was the Messiah / but also his

attending message that in Christ believing Gentiles now enjoyed equal status and equal favor in God's eyes! A message that could only mean the Jews were no longer the sole objects of God's special favor and love. Not that they had fallen in status, but that the Gentiles had been raised to an equal status and favor with them.

To use the imagery of a well known child's game, they now had to share their place as, "king of the hill." And that did not sit well with them at all! Yet the fierce Jewish opposition to his message (which at one point led to a pact between them to kill Paul) couldn't keep him from preaching it, even though it did land him in prison, and eventually led to his death.

Why? *Because as we saw last week (and will see again today), to preach the "mystery of Christ" (v. 4), or to preach the Gospel, IS to preach this message of God joining believing Jew and believing Gentile in the one body we call the Church.*

It was part of what Christ accomplished on the cross. For by His death, says Paul in 2:14-15, He, "***destroyed the barrier, and the dividing wall of hostility, and abolished in his flesh, the Law, with all its commands and regulations.***" And by doing so, the result was the creation of one unified / ethnically integrated / culturally diverse / and racially tolerant / body of Christ-followers.

And **LISTEN**: ***To deny THAT message is to deny one of the primary things Christ accomplished on the cross -- not just reconciliation between man and God, but the bringing together of believing Jew and believing Gentile in Christ*** (chap. 2:13, 14, 15 and 16 and chap 3:6, 8, 9 and 10-12).

That's our spiritual heritage! One of cultural and racial inclusion, and not exclusion! And though the church down through the ages (and even today) has not followed in step with that glorious heritage, the early church was a cultural melting pot. It was made up of Christ-following Jews, and Greeks, and Samaritans, and Arabs, and Asians, and Europeans, and Africans, and many more.

And no one group was considered any better (any more important or less important) than any other: For in Christ Jesus they we all one! Equal heirs of the promise in Christ Jesus (v. 6).

You see, we do, in reality, have a very rich and diverse cultural and racial heritage! It's part of what Christ purchased for His body, the church, on the cross! Meaning that racial prejudice should have no place in any church! For the Church (in its glorious beginnings) was in the forefront of ethnic and racial reconciliation! It was so much a part of the Gospel and the work Christ accomplished on the cross, that Paul willingly went to jail and eventually died for refusing to stop preaching it!

Which brings us to the **SECOND** thing Paul emphasizes in this text: Where is it that this concept or understanding of Gentile and Jew being united in the one body called the Church, comes from. And listen carefully: It came directly from God Himself, as a new revelation, given by the Holy Spirit to both the apostle Paul and all the other apostles!

To those who would say, "Paul, this is pretty radical stuff. Where did you find this teaching in the OT? How do you justify it scripturally?" he would respond -- listen carefully to v. 2-3 -- ***"Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation..."***

He says it again in v. 4: ***"In reading this you will understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations, as it has NOW been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets."***

And he repeats it once again in vv. 8-9: ***"Although I am the least of all God's people, this grace was given to me: To preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things."***

So what is Paul's response? ***"I didn't get it from anything in the OT. It was given to me (and all the other apostles and NT prophets) by God Himself, through revelation."***

And the word "revelation" means some hidden thing that could never have been discovered by human investigation / or study of the OT Scriptures / or human reason. Paul did not read his OT, connect a bunch of verses together, and then

say: *"Aha! Now I see it! Yes! Jer. 31 and Ezek. 36 speak of an entirely new entity called the Church!"*

Therefore, to those who would rightly say: *"You can't find the concept of the Church in the O.T."* (the Church as Jew and Gentile in one body), Paul would say, *"You're right. It's NOT there. I don't teach it because I found it there, I teach it because God Himself revealed it to me by direct, personal, divine revelation."*

For as he says in v. 9, this was the mystery, ***"hidden in God from ages past, but now to be made known to everyone."*** / It was, ***"not made known,"*** he says in v. 4, ***"to men of other generations, but has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets."*** (And "prophets," in this case, has to mean N.T. prophets).

As Harold Hoehner writes in his commentary on Ephesians: ***"This mystery was not known before the N.T. era. Only after the death of Christ was it revealed to the holy apostles and prophets by means of the Holy Spirit."***

And in another spot: ***"There are many [O.T.] passages which allude to Gentiles being blessed along with Israel... but... there is no portrayal of one body. Rather, [in the OT] Israel and the Gentiles remain distinct, though both will enjoy God's blessing. The body of believers is an entirely new concept in the NT."***

So here, we could say (in regard to this concept) -- we are standing on holy ground. Because what we have here is a divine mystery, hidden in the being of God for thousands of years -- even from the most godly and acclaimed of OT prophets, who didn't even see so much as a hint of it!

No one saw it, or expected it, until after Christ died and rose and ascended into heaven, and God let the mystery hidden within Himself be known, to Paul and Peter and the other apostles and prophets in the early Church.

That's surely why the Jews fought him and that message so bitterly. Because they couldn't find it anywhere in the OT, and they didn't accept the divine authority of Paul and the other NT apostles. To accept this teaching one had to

have faith or be convinced by the Spirit of God (who revealed it) that it WAS from God and WAS His explicit will through redemption.

And thus we come to the **THIRD** thing Paul makes clear: What is it? It's the nature of "the mystery"? / What is "the mystery of Christ?" / What is, "the mystery hidden in God from ages past?"

LISTEN: Odd as it sounds to hear it, it's the CHURCH! / The CHURCH is God's great revelation! / The CHURCH is "***the mystery hidden in God***" for so long! The creation of the entity we call the CHURCH was the new, radical, holy, precious, good news that flowed out of Christ's work on the cross, and which Paul needed to make known to everyone! (v. 9)

He describes it this way in Eph. 1:10: "***And God made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment -- to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ.***" And He means (at least in this age) through the CHURCH! God's purpose in Christ was to bring all things together under one HEAD, using the BODY attached to that HEAD, which we call the CHURCH!

That's why I'm always saying: We are not converted to remain isolated, lone-ranger Christians. We are converted into the Body of Christ and the fellowship of the CHURCH! God's purpose in redeeming us was not simply to forgive us and give us heaven when we die. It was to join us to Jesus, and to all who likewise love Jesus, and thus make us part of His one body the CHURCH!

LISTEN: The CHURCH is the object of His passionate love. God loves the CHURCH! / "Husbands," says Paul in this same book, chap. 5, v. 25, "***love your wives just as Christ loved the CHURCH & gave Himself up for HER.***" That's what Ephesians is from beginning to end: A book that declares God's passionate love and care and concern for the health of His CHURCH!

Flawed and imperfect and struggling as she often is, God passionately loves His CHURCH! Christ laid down His life, says Paul, for the CHURCH! And as Paul goes on to say in Eph. 5:26, He did this so that, "***He might make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word, and to***

present her to Himself as a radiant CHURCH, without stain, or wrinkle, or any other imperfection."

Folks, we are not there by any means! We have been cleansed and washed, but we still have many "stains and wrinkles and imperfections." Yet because in Christ He loves us in spite of those glaring flaws, He won't give up on us or let us fail to achieve the goal for which we were redeemed. ***"To be a radiant church, without stain, or wrinkle, or any other imperfection."***

He's going to ***"bring to completion the good work He began in US,"*** as Paul says in Phil. 1:6, referring to the CHURCH, and not just to each believer as an individual. And at least part of that "good work" God was carrying out in the early church, was the abolishing of ethnic prejudice from the hearts of His people, so that the Church could be that "radiant body" it was meant to be.

AND HEAR ME WELL AGAIN: This is not preaching something other than Christ or in addition to Christ. It's part and parcel of the Gospel itself! It's a major part of what Christ accomplished on the cross! It's part of what God always intended to do through Christ!

You see, I will often hear Christian people say: "I love Jesus, but I don't like the Church." / Or they'll say it even harsher: "I love Jesus, but I hate the Church." / I myself have even said (in a somewhat joking fashion) when things in any church have been rough: "The church would be a great place if it weren't for the people!"

But you see that's the whole point. The Church IS the people of God. Better yet, it's the people God loves. It's the people He's chosen, and sent Christ to lay down His life to save. Yet it is quite a rag-tag, pulled from everywhere group, isn't it? People Brennan Manning calls, "Ragamuffins." But people all the same, whom God will someday, "present to Himself as a radiant church, without stain, or wrinkle or any other imperfection."

And as much as we might struggle on occasion, to look past our differences (as did the Jews and Gentiles with all their inbred differences), or work together in perfect unity, or be that like-minded body that has ***"the same love for each***

other" that Christ has for us, **"being one in spirit and purpose"** (Phil 2:2) -- we don't have the right -- as believers -- to reject or hate what God has chosen to love.

After all, the church is CHRIST'S BODY ON EARTH and thus PRECIOUS TO HIM. And therefore we can't hate it, or reject it, without in some way hating Him or rejecting Him. As Jesus said to Paul (before his conversion) on the road to Damascus when he is rounding up Christians to throw them in jail or have them executed: **"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting ME?"** And we might say, he wasn't. Until we see that Jesus makes it very clear that anyone who persecutes His people, or hates His people, hates and persecutes Him.

That's what Paul wants us to know. This ONE BODY Paul calls the CHURCH is very precious to God. He formed it and made it. It's "the mystery of His will" that was "hidden in Him" for soooo long! It's part of what Paul's referring to when he speaks of, "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (v. 8).

In fact, the CHURCH is what makes **"the manifold wisdom of God"** known to **"the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms."** That is, the CHURCH -- as that all-inclusive, racially integrated and culturally diverse, yet unified body in Christ -- displays how wise God is! Imagine that! The Church as it was originally intended to be, says Paul, shows how unbelievably wise and loving and gracious and welcoming and inclusive and merciful God is!

Which brings us to the **CONCLUSION** of the whole matter: **"In Christ and through faith in Him, we (that is, we as that one body made up of both believing Jews and believing Gentiles of every race and nationality on earth) may approach God with freedom and confidence."** Literally, it reads: **"We have boldness and confident access [to God] through faith in Him."**

Why? Because in Christ the Law has been abolished as a means of approach to God. Under the Law one's approach to a holy God was always like that of a guilty criminal coming before a strict judge in court -- always with a bit of fear and trepidation.

But not anymore. For since Christ took our punishment upon Himself, as Calvin noted, "**our Judge has become our heavenly Father**" who receives in love. Because of Christ, we are fully acceptable to God, despite our sin, and thus we can approach God with boldness and confidence.

And LISTEN: We can have this boldness and confidence in our approach to God, because Paul has assured us that this truth is not simply his opinion. That's why Paul goes to such great lengths to assure us it wasn't something he came up with, or figured out by reading His Bible, or put together by reason or deduction. He received it from God Himself.

And thus, as one man notes: "**His Gentile readers could be assured that their share in the inheritance was authentic, because of its divine origin.**"

So what can I say? Do you want to share in all the manifold blessings God promised His chosen people? / Do you want to be fellow heirs (or equal heirs) in the chosen people of God, and inheritors with them of the covenants of promise? / Do you want to inherit eternal life?

Then come to Christ in faith, for it's the only way. For only in Christ, and through faith in Him, says Paul, can you ever have boldness in speaking with God / and confidence in your access or approach to God -- because only in Him has the law been done away with as the means of approach.

Only in Him can you be assured that you are the object of God's passion-ate love and His Fatherly acceptance.

Only in Him can you know the mystery of the ages / and be joined to His one body / and made fellow partakers of the promise in Jesus.