

You Can't Get to Heaven in a Wooden Crate

The Future of Israel – Part II

Romans 11:7-10

Introduction

My daughter gave me the lyrics to a little song that she learned. She would say a line and I was supposed to repeat it back to her. You may have learned this too, a long time ago?!

Oh you can't get to heaven,

In a little rowboat,

Cause the little rowboat,

It just won't float.

Here is another stanza:

Oh you can't get to heaven,

In a limousine,

Cause God don't sell,

No gasoline.

I am thrilled with the grammar skills she is learning!

I even made up a stanza to go along with my sermon today. Here it is. Are you ready?

Oh you can't get to heaven,

In a wooden crate,

Cause wooden crates,

Aren't mailed to heaven's gate.

In case you think I have had too much time on my hands this past week, I made that up after reading an article that appeared in the Associated Press.

The Associated Press ran a story last year about Charles McKinley, a twenty-five year old shipping clerk for a New York warehouse. He had decided to visit his parents, who lived in Dallas, Texas, but did

not have the money to buy an airplane ticket. So he concocted a plan to ship himself in a postal crate from the warehouse to Dallas, and charge his company the freight.

On Friday, September 5, 2003, after filling out paperwork describing the cargo as clothing and a computer, McKinley called for a courier service and then, crawled into a 3 by 4 foot crate. The crate was picked up by truck and driven to New Jersey before being loaded onto a cargo plane. On Saturday, the crate was delivered to the McKinley home in Dallas, Texas. Charles kicked open the box, startling his parents and the delivery man.

Without food or water on the fifteen hour journey, he had actually taken huge risks he had not thought of. The crate could have been handled roughly, giving him a concussion, or worse, breaking his arms or legs. The box he was in was placed in the pressurized, heated storage cabin, but it could just as easily have been placed in the lower, unpressurized compartments, where he would have died. This stunt could have cost him everything.

It did cost him something. He was fined \$1,500 and placed on probation, but he could have been fined much more and given one year in prison.

I found it interesting that the shipping charges he incurred were \$550. That would have bought a seat in business class for him.ⁱ

What a picture of humanity this story is, right? "Eternity? Yea, I'll get there my way! Sure it was crazy to try to get to Texas in a wooden crate, but my religion is much more sophisticated – it will deliver me!"

That is certainly the picture that Paul has painted of the Israelite nation. They are proud, self-confident, secure, expert craftsmen who have constructed a crate of creeds that they believe will guarantee their safe passage to heaven's shore.

They have forgotten one thing in their journey – they have overlooked their hearts. They have a serious medical condition that is not covered by their national insurance policy. Their hearts are not prepared for the journey.

The Spiritual Prognosis of Israel

Would you notice the divine prognosis? You will find it in Romans, chapter 11, verse 7.

What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened;

The last word in that verse presents an idea that we have not yet covered. It is the condition of Israel's heart, as a nation.

The Greek word, translated "hardened," is from "porow (πορωω)," which means, "to harden; to cover with a thick skin; to harden by covering with a callus."ⁱⁱ

The Greek word actually gives us our English medical word "porosis," as in osteoporosis, which is the formation of bone around joints.

In the Greek culture, this word was used of a callus – a growth on the skin of some part of the body that is roughened with use.

I can remember my grandfather's hands. His calluses were permanent reminders of his hard work on the farm in Minnesota. You could have taken a stick pin and poked all around the palm and fingers of his hand, without ever causing him to feel any pain.

A callus causes a part of your body to lose feeling. It becomes insensitive and unfeeling.

The divine Physician finishes examining the nation Israel and says, among other things, "They have 'porosis' of the heart – a calloused heart."

It is a terminal condition that will require a heart transplant if they are to survive.

The Symptoms of the Prognosis

Would you notice the symptoms of Israel's disease?

Loss of spiritual direction

1. The first symptom is a loss of spiritual direction.

Paul writes in verse 8a.

Just as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor . . ."

This verse is taken from the prophet Isaiah, who writes in chapter 29, verse 10,

For the Lord has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep, He has shut your eyes, the prophets; and He has covered your heads, the seers.

In other words, you do not know which way to turn; you are confused by your own spiritual wandering, speculation, and disobedience.

One of the marks of unbelieving humanity is spiritual wandering.

You may have noticed the celebrities who have begun wearing a red string around their left wrist. This represents a belief from a Jewish mystical cult known as the Kabbalah.

The red string supposedly carries mystical powers to protect the wearer from the influences of the evil eye; that is, negative energy that flows from unfriendly people around you. They believe that the red string has mystical energy and protective power.

It originates from the fact that all of the individual bracelet strands are cut from a longer strand that is first wrapped around the grave stone of the Jewish matriarch, Rachel. It is then cut into pieces and worn by followers who are now protected from negative energy in every area of life.

Whether it is red string around the wrist or putting a mirror in the foyer of your house to direct the positive energy of the universe through your home, it is all the same – it is spiritual wandering and superstition.

You do not need a string . . . you need a Savior!

A Savior – what greater protection in and through the challenges of life! This includes all of those negative people you are related to; all of those negative influences at work.

Isaiah spoke of the prophets and the seers of Israel losing their connection with the God of Israel. They began wandering around as if they were – as the NIV translates chapter 29, verse 9 – under the influence of wine and beer. They were staggering from one day to the next, without any true spiritual direction.

Without spiritual direction, you make your wooden crate and hope for the best. You do not look for direction from the word of God, you just make it up.

Whether it is hanging a crystal on your rear view mirror to reflect mystical energy and light, or making sure your house faces the right direction, or putting your plants in the right spots so that negative energy is thwarted – God calls it wandering. Maybe you are into doing something physical, so you connect through Yoga, which is a word within Buddhism that means “yoke,” and is a series of exercises and postures that yoke the participant with the universal flow of energy in and through their bodies, or perhaps you skip all of that stuff and just wear a little red string – God calls it wandering.

The great Christian thinker and author C. S. Lewis, once said very simply that there were two kinds of people in the world: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, “All right then, have it your way.”

- If you would rather have a string than a Savior, have it your way.
- If you would rather yoke to the universe than wear My yoke, have it your way.
- If you would rather fight evil energy with mirrors than the mirror of My word, have it your way.

But be warned – your spiritual experimentations may be symptoms of a hardening heart.

Loss of spiritual discernment

2. Paul goes on to give the second symptom of a hardened heart against the gospel of grace. Not only is there a loss of spiritual direction, but there is a loss of spiritual discernment.

Look at verse 8b of Romans, chapter 11.

... eyes to see not ...

This is somewhat repetitive, but with a different nuance.

Paul quotes another Old Testament passage. This one is in Deuteronomy, chapter 29. Verse 4 refers to spiritual blindness – the inability to discern truth from error – which is the condition of the unbelieving world.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, in I Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 14,

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

The Lord often spoke of the willful blindness of the Jewish nation.

The apostle John announced in chapter 1, verse 9, of his gospel,

There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.

That word “enlighten” is from the Greek word, “photizo (φωτίζω),” which gives us our English word “photo,” as in photograph. It means, “to shed light; to expose; to reveal”.

In other words, Jesus Christ came to give us, as it were, a photograph of God. He came to reveal God, as Colossians, chapter 2, verse 9, says,

For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form

Jesus Christ is the physical manifestation of the triune God. He is the photo album of the nature and character of God.

Unfortunately, however, the nation rejected the Light. John writes in his gospel, in chapter 3, verses 19 through 20,

This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

In a sermon recorded in Matthew, chapter 13, the Lord quotes from the same passages in Isaiah and Deuteronomy that Paul quotes from in Romans, chapter 11.

So, two symptoms of a hardened heart toward the gospel of grace are the loss of spiritual direction and the loss of spiritual discernment. Let me give another.

Loss of spiritual discrimination

3. The third symptom is the loss of spiritual discrimination.

Look at verse 8c.

... and ears to hear not, down to this very day.

In a sermon Jesus preached to His Jewish audience, He combined both the loss of spiritual

discernment and the loss of spiritual discrimination. In Matthew, chapter 13, verses 14 through 16, He says,

You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes, otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them. But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

In other words, we want to stay in the dark! Since our deeds are evil, we do not want any lights turned on. We say, “Turn off those lights, they are hurting our eyes.”

We do not want to hear the truth and we do not want to see the truth.

The consequences of the prognosis

Paul writes to the Jewish nation and any nation that wanders from the light of the gospel, “If you want the darkness, then you can have it. But beware, there are consequences.”

There are consequences not only to Israel, but to every nation that rejects the light of the gospel.

Consequences of moral darkness

1. There are the consequences of moral darkness.

Is it any surprise that a little more than six hundred teenagers in this country contract syphilis every day.

Is it any surprise that during the next twenty-four hours, more than 35,000 adults in this country will contract a sexually transmitted disease – thirteen million people every year and growing.

Is it any wonder that there are three million alcoholics in this country between the ages of fourteen and seventeen.

There is no one to lead them.

Is any wonder that homosexuality, fornication and just about every other form of sexual deviancy spoken of in scripture is not only accepted, but defended as a personal right.

Just yesterday, there was yet another news picture of a lovely woman in a white wedding dress

with a veil, holding her bouquet of flowers, standing in a civil ceremony next to another woman, also wearing a white wedding dress with veil and a bouquet of flowers.

I thought, “How sadly they wander – one side of them dreaming of being a bride dressed in white, and the other side, encouraged by the applause of an unregenerate society, binds them in an unnatural union, as Paul writes in Romans, chapter 1, to one another.”

When you reject the light of God’s moral standard, you choose moral and ethical confusion, despair, and lonely darkness.

Consequences of intellectual darkness

2. There are the consequences of intellectual darkness.

There is an inability to interpret and integrate truth, when we reject the light of the gospel.

On the way to drop our guys off at college, we swung by the Sight and Sound Theater in Lansing County, Pennsylvania. It is a huge theater, seating approximately three thousand people, and is continually sold out. They put on biblical productions and at the time, were playing Noah and the ark. There is a huge stage that wraps around the front of the auditorium, with some parts of it being three and four stories high. It is designed to make you feel like you are in the ark with the live animals when the storm begins.

It is amazing to consider that the people could see the animals arriving – wild and domestic animals in pairs – two of every species. I know, you wonder why Noah did not go ahead and swat those mosquitoes! Just imagine that scene, so long ago. The people from the surrounding region could see this undeniable sign that God was at work, yet no one, outside of the family of Noah, made a reservation.

They missed the connection; they could not integrate what they saw with the reality of biblical truth. They did not see it and did not hear it.

Why? Paul wrote in II Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 4,

In whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

They just do not see it, apart from the grace of God.

I love the satire of an incident involving Sherlock Holmes and his bumbling friend, Dr. Watson. They were on the trail of some investigation and had to camp outdoors. They pitched their tent under the stars and went fast asleep. Sometime in the middle of the night, Sherlock woke Dr. Watson and said, “Watson, look up at the stars and tell me what deductions you can make.”

Watson rubbed his eyes, and then said, “Well, I see millions of stars, and if even a few of those have planets, it’s quite possible there are some planets like Earth, and if there are a few planets like Earth out there, there might also be life.”

Holmes said, “Watson, you idiot, somebody stole our tent.”ⁱⁱⁱ

You have to let that sink in!

How brilliant we can sound at guessing things we know nothing about, while at the same time, entirely missing what is in front of our nose.

One old puritan leader once wrote, “The man who deliberately shuts his eyes against the light of truth shall gradually lose the power of seeing.”

There are the consequences of moral and ethical and intellectual darkness. Let me give one more.

Consequences of spiritual darkness

3. There are the consequences of spiritual darkness.

We have already given ample illustration of this – in Rome, in Israel, and in America.

To the Jewish nation who rejected the Light of the world, and screamed for Rome to extinguish the Light, I find it fascinating that God gave them an illustration of what they wanted.

When Jesus hung on the cross, Luke recorded that for three hours, in the middle of the afternoon, the sky went black. The sun’s light was miraculously obscured and the world hung in total, deep darkness.

It is as if the Father said to mankind, “You wanted darkness; you hated the Light, I’ll give you three hours of it – and there is an eternity of it ahead, if your heart remains hardened.”

So what is in store for those who do believe? Revelation, chapter 21, describes heaven and says in verses 23 and 25, among other things,

[there is] no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. . . . there will be no night there . . .

For those of you who have accepted the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, your future will not include any remnants of spiritual or ethical or intellectual or moral darkness, and not even physical darkness, ever again.

Now the Jews felt secure in their handmade crate, because they had the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. It is interesting to note that Paul quotes from all three in this paragraph. In Romans, chapter 11, he quotes from:

- the prophet Isaiah – in verse 8a;
- the law book of Deuteronomy – in verse 8b;
- the writings of one of David’s Psalms – in verses 9 and 10.

All three parts of the Jewish sacred scriptures condemn the choice of Israel to reject the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

This is the divine prognosis – you have a hardened, calloused heart.

These are the symptoms of the prognosis – eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear.

Now, this is the seriousness of the prognosis – unavoidable consequences and coming judgment.

The Seriousness of the Prognosis

Notice Romans, chapter 11, verses 9 and 10.

And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened to see not and bend their backs forever.”

Circle the words of warning in those verses: snare, trap, stumbling block, retribution.

They trusted in their table – perhaps a reference to their sacred feasts; their rituals; their Passover; their table of showbread; their confidence that God will continue to,

. . . prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies . . . (Psalm 23:5)

However, the table is no longer protected from the nations.

Circle the words of judgment: they move from eyes that will not see (verse 8) to eyes that cannot see (verse 10).

That is the condition of a hardened heart. It moves from “I will not believe,” to “I cannot believe.”

So is Israel going to be discarded?

Skip to verse 25 of Romans, chapter 11. We will study this in more detail later. Paul writes,

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery – so that you will not be wise in your own estimation – that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

In other words, believe it or not, there is hope for the hardened! The hardening of Israel's heart is partial, not total – individual Jews can come to faith in Christ, even now.

I met one last Sunday after one of the services. He came up to talk with me. He is a Jew who has accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The hardening of the nation's heart is partial, not total. Furthermore, it is temporary, not eternal. Paul writes in verse 25, it will be over after the fullness of the Gentiles occurs.

You might ask, "What does that mean?"

I will answer, "You are just going to have to keep coming back, if you want to find out."

Application

Let me say one more thing, by way of application.

The Israelite hugged the scroll of the law to their heart – and believed they were safe.

God looked at their heart – and knew they were calloused and hardened, and in great danger.

The prognosis was deadly serious – the nation was confident, but in grave danger.

Now, the average American would never consider getting into his car without an inspection tag, proper identification, and plenty of insurance to cover himself, his vehicle, and any other driver he might run into – not to mention medical insurance and life insurance.

They have coverage for earth journeys – but no coverage for eternity.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a vast difference between Blue Cross insurance and blessed assurance. Most people see the benefit of Blue Cross – not so many see the benefit of the rugged cross.

However, the truth remains; the light remains – run to the Savior – He is your only hope of arriving safely in heaven.

In January, 1985, a large suitcase, unmarked and unclaimed, eventually caught the attention of U.S. Customs agents in the Los Angeles International Airport. When Customs agents opened the suitcase, they found the curled-up body of a young Iranian woman. She had been dead for four days. The pieces finally fell together under an investigation. She was the wife of a young Iranian living in the United States. Unable to obtain a visa to enter the country, she took matters into her own hands. She decided to smuggle herself into America via an airplane's cargo bay. Unlike Charles McKinley, the shipping clerk I mentioned earlier, she was not put in a pressurized, heated cargo bay – and was killed.

The truth is, even if she had survived the journey, she would have been an illegal alien and would have been returned to Iran.

Paul has made it clear to Israel and to us – you do not get in by race or ritual; you cannot sneak into the kingdom or create some ingenious way to gain entrance – you can only enter through the Redeemer, who is the way.

It is true, you cannot get to heaven in a limousine, a rowboat, or a wooden crate of your own making. God has already purchased a ticket for you in business class – no, in first class.

So, do not try some man-made stunt of your own. Do not bend your back, as Paul said the nation of Israel is doing, under the weight of the law.

Come to the gospel of Christ – and gain entrance forever into the everlasting kingdom of light.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/7/2004 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Greg Asimakoupoulos, Sept. 2003, <http://www.preachingtoday.com>, Associated Press.

ⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Zondervan, 1976), p. 372.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sherman Buford, Jan. 2002, <http://www.preachingtoday.com>, New York Times.