

A RIGHT IS ONLY A PRIVILEGE!

Today's Text: Romans 9: 6 - 33

Extracts:

But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For *they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called."* That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed....What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! *For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion."* So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy [Rom. 9: 6-8, 14-16]

Anwar al-Awlaki, the well-known leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, was born in 1971 in the US state of New Mexico.¹ Following his established links with al-Qaeda operatives and sympathisers within and outside the country, the US Government authorized the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to kill him. In July 2010, his father, Nasser al-Awlaki, appealed to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to help protect his son's rights as an American citizen who could not be killed without trial, charge or conviction. However, on 30 September 2011, Anwar was killed in an American drone attack on his base in Yemen in the Middle East.

Under normal circumstances, America will spend its last dime to protect or save the lives of American citizens anywhere in the world. But in the case of Anwar, the state ranked the security of the country over the rights of one dangerous citizen. It also confirms that every right that we enjoy is actually a privilege to which are attached some responsibilities. That is why on the national passports of most countries, it is clearly stated that the document is the property of the state and must be surrendered to an authorized representative on demand. So, if being born again gives us the right to be called sons of God, is it not a mere privilege and can He not withdraw it when we abuse it? In this week's Bible verse, Paul reminds us that God's promise to Abraham was to the children of promise, not of the flesh. Do you know that you could be toying with your right to be called a child of God? Let us find out from this week's very important study.

¹ Story is based on the following sources: "Obituary: Anwar al-Awlaki," *BBC News*, 30 September 2011; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11658920> ; and "Rights groups sue US over Muslim cleric al-Awlaki," *BBC News*, 3 August, 2010; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-10855869>

1. Background: God’s purpose and His justice don’t make sense to man!

The Scriptures say, “But as many as received Him [Jesus Christ], to them He gave *the right to become children of God*, to those who believe in His name” [Jn 1: 12]. Elsewhere in the word of God, we are also told, “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” [Jn 3: 18]. What will happen to the person who has received the right to be called the child of God but misuses or squanders it? Is that right (that is, a justified claim, or the freedom to do something) then not a privilege (that is, a benefit that is not available to everyone who is entitled to have it)?² That is the question that we shall attempt to answer in this week’s study.

Most of us lay claims to certain rights by virtue of our accident of birth. For example, can you imagine your world view if you had been born black instead of white, male instead of female, a prince or princess instead of a pauper or an American instead of a Chinese? One Obama born in America is the President of the United States of America. His half-brother, Malik Obama, born in Kenya has lost the race for governor of the Western County of Siaya in the just concluded (March 2013) Kenyan elections!³ *Therefore, we must be careful how we see and use our rights, especially with respect to God.*

In this week’s Bible verses, Paul examined the subject within the context of God’s promises to His chosen race, the people of Israel, also popularly known as the Jews. Paul himself was a Jew but he wrote provocatively and emphatically as follows, “But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham. [for] those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed” [Rom. 9: 6-8]. Let us try to understand Paul by looking at the matter as follows:

a) *God chose the Jews over the rest of us*

We all know that God chose the Jews over the rest of mankind. As the children of Israel in the wilderness were about to enter the Promised Land, Moses reminded them, “For you are *a holy people to the LORD your God*; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, *a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth.*” He did not choose them because of any special natural endowments but because He loved them and had sworn an oath to their forefathers [Deut. 7: 6-8].

But we know that a good number of them perished in the wilderness on account of their disobedience. Even Moses himself was not allowed to enter the Promised Land because he struck the rock twice instead of

² Definitions of right and privilege used here are from the *Encarta Dictionary*: English (North America)

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21692738>

speaking to it the second time as commanded by God [Num. 20: 11-12]. Even when Moses prayed for grace to enter, God said to him, “Enough of that! Speak no more to Me of this matter” [Deut. 3: 23-26]. It follows, therefore, that *even though every Jew has the right to be treated as God’s holy people, only the obedient among them can have access to that right.*

b) *God chose some Jews over the rest of them!*

Paul said that the promise to Abraham was not to his children of the flesh but of the promise in that the seed of Abraham passed to Isaac [Rom. 9: 7-8]. We know that Abraham had Ishmael by Hagar, the Egyptian maid to Sarah before Isaac was born. After the death of Sarah, Abraham married Keturah and had multiple children by her. He gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away while he was still alive but “he gave all he had to Isaac” the child of promise [Gen. 25: 1-6].

Again, we learn from that story that *God chose some Jews over the rest of them, just as He had chosen the Jews over the rest of mankind.* Even among the descendants of Abraham, the promise went to Isaac, and of Isaac’s children, Esau and Jacob, Paul reminded us of what God said when their mother was expectant, “The older shall serve the younger.” Elsewhere, it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated” [Rom. 9: 9-13; Mal. 1: 2-3]. So what factors then determine how God dispenses rights and privileges?

c) *Rights belong to the giver, not the receiver!*

Paul asked a blunt question, “Is there unrighteousness with God?” And he answered it quickly, “Certainly not!” As God had told Moses in the wilderness, He shows mercy and compassion on whomever He chooses. *We are not in any position to question God’s choices, just as clay cannot tell the potter how it should be used.* Concluding, Paul reminded us that God “has mercy on whom He wills, and on whom He wills He hardens” [Rom. 9: 14-21].

From the foregoing, it is clear that *God’s purposes and justice do not make sense to humans because His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways*, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His ways higher than our ways and His thoughts than our thoughts [Is. 55: 8-9]. So, *if He has given you the right to be called His children by virtue of your accepting Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, do you not think that you need to guard it carefully as a rare privilege so as not to lose it?*

2. Accepting responsibility for your rights

On one occasion, Jesus was among Jews that claimed to believe in Him. He said to them, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” But what was their response? They said, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone.” Jesus acknowledged that but if they were indeed Abraham’s descendants, they would do the works of Abraham. They continued, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father-God.” It was at that stage that Jesus told them the home truth about themselves, “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do” [Jn 8: 31-47].

What do we learn from that exchange? Those Jews were claiming their rights as inheritors of Abraham’s promise without realizing that Abraham rejoiced to see Christ’s day; he saw it and was glad, and before Abraham, Jesus is the “I AM” [vv. 48-58]⁴. So, instead of that right leading them on to become children of God, they behaved like the children of the devil.

Like the Jews of old, believers in Christ “are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, [God’s] own special people” who should proclaim the praises of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvelous light, “who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” [1 Pet. 2: 9-10]. So, how can you as one of such believers accept full responsibility for your right to be called the child of God? Here are some guidelines that you can consider:

a) *See your right as easy-come-easy-go*

Some people do not value what they have until they lose it. Much more, ***most of us do not value what we have not worked for.*** The grace of God falls into this latter category. It is a kind of ‘easy-come-easy-go.’ In the words of Jesus during His Sermon on the Mount, “Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and tear you in pieces” [Matt. 7: 6]. Therefore, ***you can lose your sonship rights as easily as you get them unless you sit up and guard them jealously.***

Whoever is in Christ is supposedly a new creation. Old things are expected to have passed away; all things become new [2 Cor. 5: 17]. But what we see or hear in our places of worship or read in the media these days can be quite appalling. Sexual immorality, stealing of church funds and other vices are quite common. Much worse, they are being covered up to protect the public image of the church. Gullible worshippers’ attention

⁴ This can be inferred from two encounters that Abraham had with the Pre-incarnate Christ. First, after he had rescued his nephew Lot from enemy kings that had seized his territory, Abraham met and paid tithe to Melchizedek, “the priest of God Most High” [Gen. 14: 18-20]. Jesus has been called a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek [Heb. 5: 6; Ps. 110: 4]. The second time was when three men visited Abraham before Isaac was conceived. One of them turned out to be the LORD [Gen. 18: 1-2, 10-33]. Only Jesus is visible among the three members of the Trinity.

is diverted with undue emphasis on prosperity messages and undue emphasis on hard work through fasting and revival services. But we should not deceive ourselves for God is not mocked. As people sow, so shall they reap. Those who sow to the flesh will of the flesh reap corruption. Those who sow to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life [Gal.6: 7-8].

b) *Pay more attention to your responsibilities than entitlements*

Since it is quite easy to lose focus when we fight for rights, it may be better to pay more attention to your responsibilities than to your entitlements. We have been saved by grace through faith. Yet, we are **God's workmanship "created in Christ Jesus for good works**, which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them" [Eph. 2: 8-10]. In other words, to use the words of James, "faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" [Jam. 2: 17].

Take our Lord's response to His disciples when He overheard them disputing as to who was the greatest among them. He told them, "He who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Yet ***I am among you as the One who serves.***" The One who came to bestow a kingdom on them so that they could eat and drink at His table there and to sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel was the one who served them [Lk 22: 24-30]!

Let others know your faith in Christ by your fruits of love, joy, a forgiving spirit, humility, taking better care of other people's things than yours, etc. Let people see you serve with joy and selflessness in the Lord's vineyard, in your family and in your place of work or study. Let people see you obey state laws voluntarily, such as traffic rules, even where a breach will not earn you any sanctions. Then, your rights will shine because you are now entitled to them!

c) *Thank God for choosing you and not someone else!*

God shows mercy on whomever He shows mercy, and on whom He wills, He hardens [Rom. 9: 18]. So, if God has chosen you and not someone else on whom to shower His mercy, do you not think you should thank Him for it?

See what David did when God revealed to him through the prophet Nathan His long-term plans for him and his descendants. We are told, "King David went in and sat before the LORD, and he said, 'Who am I, O LORD GOD? And what is my house that You have brought me this far?'" Then he poured out his heart in praise, saying, "Therefore, You are great, O

LORD GOD. For there is none like You, nor is there any God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears” [2 Sam. 7: 1-22]. See how Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit when the seventy disciples that He had sent out to preach and heal in His name came back with remarkable results. Looking up to heaven (presumably), He said, “I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” [Lk 10: 17-22]. *In both cases, the ones who enjoyed the right gave the glory and praise to the One who granted it in the first place- God Himself.*

In sum, here is what Paul has said to us: the Jews are not a chosen race because they are related to Abraham by blood since “he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God” [Rom. 2: 28-29]. Therefore, *we are now all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Consequently, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female; for we are all now one in Christ. If we are Christ’s, then we are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise* [Gal. 3: 26-29]. What a responsibility!

3. Conclusion: See your Christ-given right as your life-line to God!

The end of our faith is the salvation of our souls [1 Pet. 1:9], *and there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved except by the name of Jesus* [Acts 4: 12]. Therefore, for the rest of your life here on earth, you are now a mere sojourner and pilgrim who must strive to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul [1 Pet. 2: 11]. But, if you blow that chance, the end could be worse [2 Pet. 2: 20-22]. *That you have the right to life does not mean you also have the right to take it. So, it is a form of spiritual suicide to claim to know Christ but remain in sin.*

Don’t play with your Christ-given right, your life-line to God. One of the thieves crucified along with Jesus on Mount Calvary blew his chance by chastising the Lord instead of repenting like his fellow thief that Jesus gave instant right to be with Him in Paradise [Lk 23: 39].

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