

1st Sunday in Lent

Deut. 26:1-11; Psalm 91; Luke 4:1-13; Romans 10:8b-13

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 is the primary decree in Deuteronomy regarding the Festival of the First Fruits (also called the Festival of Weeks).

Deuteronomy 16 legislates three primary festivals that are to dominate Israel's life together as a people. "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread (i.e., Passover), at the festival of weeks (i.e., First Fruits), and at the festival of booths" (Deut. 16:16a). Passover was designed to remember and celebrate the primary saving event of Israel – their miraculous deliverance by Yahweh from Egyptian slavery. The Festival of Booths was to recall Israel's wilderness wanderings and the covenant made between them and God there; it was consequently meant as a covenant renewal ceremony. But the most intriguing festival of them all was the Festival of Weeks (also called the First Fruits).

"You shall keep the festival of weeks for the Lord your God, contributing a freewill offering in proportion to the blessing that you have received from the Lord your God. Rejoice before the Lord your God – you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you – at the place that the Lord your God will chose as a dwelling for his name" (16:10-11).

The Festival of Weeks was celebrated fifty days after Passover both as the conclusion of the cycle that began at Passover and on the occasion of the first wheat harvest. It was called the Festival of Weeks because the entire festival covered the seven weeks of harvest – from the first cuttings of barley to the completion of the wheat harvest. It was also called the "Day of First Fruits" (Num. 28:26; Lev. 23:17), which initiated the festival with the ceremonial offering of the first grain to God. Finally, this festival was named "Pentecost" in post-exilic and in the New Testament era (Tob. 2:1; Acts 2:1).

As Passover was meant to celebrate God as liberator, First Fruits was meant to celebrate God as provider. As Passover remembered God's mighty acts to rescue Israel from slavery, so First Fruits would remind Israel that God was the source of their wealth and bounty, of rain and earth nurture and of agricultural fertility (Jer. 5:24).

The way that the Festival of First Fruits was celebrated is presented in both Deuteronomy 16 and 26. It was a feast day of solemn joy and thanksgiving for God's protection and provision of Israel, and a reminder of Israel's utter dependence upon Him not only for their spiritual sustenance but for their economic well-being and political stability, as well.

On the high day of festival, all work was to stop and all Israel was to gather at its central shrine (Lev. 23:21; Deut. 16:9-10). There, each family was to bring two loaves of bread made from the

“first fruits” of barley¹ as well as a lamb, both of which were to be offered to God as a wave offering. All men attending the ceremony would then dance an “altar dance” during which they sang the Hallel (Pss. 113-118). Then the feast was concluded by all eating a communal meal from the offering to which the poor, the slaves, the aliens, the orphans and widows and all Levites were invited (Deut. 16:11).

The most detailed and theologically rich description of the Festival of the First Fruits is given in Deut. 26:1-15 – our Old Testament lesson for today. Each Israelite, the text tells us, is to “take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (26:2a) and is to take it to the central shrine at the appointed time. There, this symbolic offering is to be given to the priest (vs. 3). When the offering is presented to the priest, each Israelite is to give a particular (and exceedingly beautiful) recital of God’s mighty acts that rescued Israel and the benefits those acts have brought to this specific Israelite (vss. 5b-10a). The recital is made not to the priest to whom the basket of first fruits is given, but directly to God.

The basket is then placed before the altar by the Israelite. “Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house” (26:11).

Finally, when the tithe is paid, each Israelite confesses to God how he has both invested that tithe over the year since the previous Festival of First Fruits in support of “the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans and the widows” (vs. 13b). For the money is not to be reserved by the people over the year for religious observance at the end of the year. Nor is the money to be used by the family for their own comfort or well being during that year. That money is to be used to provide financial support throughout the year to those who have the potential of becoming the victims of the system (strangers, orphans, widows) and the religious establishment (Levites).

The Festival of the First Fruits demonstrates how all of Israelite life was centered on a continual reminder of the nation’s dependence upon their God who provided for their liberation and sustenance, and the acting out of that reminder by socially responsible action on the part of each family of means so that there would be no poor in the land.

In the Festival of the First Fruits, when each Israelite would present his basket of the “first of all the fruits of the ground” to the priest, Deut. 26 commands that he say these powerfully poetic words:

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this

¹ By “first fruits”, the biblical writers did not mean the first of the harvest of fruit (e.g., pears, olives, pomegranates), but the first of the grain harvest (barley, wheat, etc.), the “fruiting” of the grain when the heads of the grain were ready to burst.

land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me” (26:5b-10a).

This confession of faith begins, first, with the recognition that “a wandering Aramean was my ancestor” (vs. 5b). On the face of it, this seems to simply be a reference to the nomadic state of Israel’s ancestors – shepherds following their flocks. But the Hebrew word translated as “wandering” is no synonym for “nomadic”. Rather, the word carries the sense of being lost or about to perish. So the Israelite confessed that his ancestors were a lost people, cut off from God and all humanity, wandering about in both a physical and spiritual desert, almost about to perish. They were subject to every political oppression, economic exploitation and religious domination. They were truly lost!

Then God acted. Second, the recital presents God’s saving action and Israel’s response, not Israel’s actions to save itself. Responding to Israel’s plaintive cry for help, the confession tells us, “The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (26:8a). And then, after repeated deliverance of Israel in the wilderness “with a terrifying display of power”, God “gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (26:8b, 9b).

The recital is very objective, relying upon God’s clearly demonstrated intervention in and use of history as his arena for liberation and salvation. It presents two primary acts of God that built Israel into a nation – deliverance from Egyptian slavery and the gift of a new land (vss. 8-9). Thus, the confession of faith modeled before Israel and to every individual at this annual celebration is a model of objective, verifiable faith. Israel’s faith was not to be built upon unverifiable internal feelings or even individual beliefs or convictions. It was to be built upon clearly demonstrated historical facts – Israel’s deliverance from Egypt at the Passover, at the Reed Sea and in the wilderness, and their successful possession of a new and a “promised” land.

Third, the confession of faith clearly presents Israel’s expected response to God’s liberation of them. “So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me” (vs. 10). A lot is not made of the transition from God’s act to Israel’s response. Instead, it is a rather terse statement that does not examine the forty years of Israel’s painful shaping in the wilderness, the faithfulness and unfaithfulness (viz. Ai) of the conquest or the years of both faithful implementing and repeated sidestepping of the covenant once Israel had taken possession of the Promised Land. The confession simply states, “This is what God did to rescue us from our lost and perishing condition. So now, in both obedience and gratitude, we respond”!

In Israel’s response, it is worthy to note where the emphasis lies. It is on what God has done – not on how we respond. Rather than the Israelite describing at great length his pre-liberation condition and how God saved him, the emphasis is on God’s salvific work. It’s not about us! It’s about God, and what God has chosen to do for his people!

It is also worthy to note what is the appropriate response. It is a response of obedience and gratitude. In essence, the recital is saying “Because of all you have done for us (and for me as a part of “us”), I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you have given me.” I obey you, God, living my personal life and governing my economic activities, my political decisions, and

nurturing my relationships with you and with my neighbors in obedience to your call and your expectations of me. And I obey you in gratitude for all you've done for my people and me.

With this annual recital, every single Israelite was reminded of and publicly gave testimony to the origins of his nation, how greatly Israel was dependent upon their intervening and liberating God, and the reason for their present abundance. With such a recital, each Israelite's commitment to the covenant and to their people was reinforced. And with such reinforcements, the potential for them to realize themselves as a community of shalom practicing an economics of stewardship and equitable distribution of wealth, a politics of justice and a religion of personal and national relationship with God would be greatly enhanced.

After each Israelite had made his confession of faith and had remembered how God had delivered him and his nation, Deuteronomy 26 then instructs him what to do next. "You shall set (the basket of first fruits) down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house" (26:10b-11).

It's party time! The ceremony and act of devotion, confession and dedication is to be followed with a celebration! Commitment is to conclude with a party. The final act of that holy event is comprised of two actions.

First, it is not to be a solitary or even familial act. The Israelites are instructed, "You, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate". Into that family's celebration are to be brought the religious establishment (Levites) and the most marginalized people (aliens) of that neighborhood. Each celebration brings around the table society's most powerful and the most powerless, despised or marginalized people of the city. There, they face each other and have to do with each other – those who would normally have nothing to do with each other – around one of the central spiritual events of the year.

Observing this event would be as if all Christians were required to invite the poor and their city's most powerful with which they were acquainted home for Christmas dinner. What a new light this throws on Luke 14:12-14! What a means for leveling society. And what a means to insist that the whole social system of a city or nation grapple with each other – not only on a systemic level, but on a personal level as fellow human beings across a dining room table!

Second, the celebration is to be a time of rejoicing around the bounty with which God has gifted that family. Each Israelite head of a household is instructed, "celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house" (26:11b). The Hebrew word for "celebrate" captures the sense of eating together. The festival of the First Fruits (and the other two annual festivals) was to be concluded with a large communion meal. But it wasn't just a festive board, like our Thanksgiving dinner. It was a joyous meal *before the Lord*. It was as much an act of worship as the recital of faith and the offering of the first fruits that preceded it. Thus, this meal was a holy meal – an act of communion in which the worshippers, filled with joy over God's blessings upon them (whether they were in want or in plenty) gave hearty thanks to God for whatever blessings they had been given that year!

Deuteronomy 26:12-15 presents the concluding portion of the Festival of the First Fruits.² In this section, the Festival of the First Fruits progresses from being an annual event to being a festival that is kept alive in the people's hearts all year long. And this they do through their responsible actions.

The passage instructs each Israelite to return to his home after the completion of the Festival, and there continue to withdraw a tithe from his business or work. This tithe he is then to distribute to "the Levites, the aliens, the orphans and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns" (vs. 12b). In other words, what is laid out here is the means developed for Israel to provide economic security to all. It is, if you will, the social welfare program of Israel.

The objective of this strategy is to guarantee, "there are no poor among you" (Dt. 15:4). The strategy the nation will follow to make sure that there are no poor is to first identify the most vulnerable people who are most likely to slip over into poverty. These would be "the Levites, the aliens, the orphans and the widows" – the Levites because, as the priestly tribe, they are excluded from holding tribal land (see Deut. 18:1-2); the aliens, because they are excluded from any due process of the Jewish Law that is provided solely for the Israelites and because they are marginalized by their very status as aliens; the orphans and widows because all ownership in the ancient Near East was in a husband's estate and therefore, without a husband, a woman and her offspring would be particularly vulnerable.

The strategy laid out here to protect Israel's vulnerable was the tithe. *Every* Israelite household was to commit 10% of their annual income to the support of the vulnerable, potentially poor and marginalized of their society. With such a significant redistribution of wealth (10% of the gross national product on any year), along with the other stipulations of Deuteronomy regarding wealth and power, it would guarantee there would be no poverty within the country.

Secondly, it was the task of each Israelite family not only to reserve 10% of its annual income for the nation's poor. It was also their responsibility to distribute it! They were to directly give away this money themselves. And this was to be done within the context of inviting the recipients into their homes to participate with the family in their celebration of and feasting on the Festival of the First Fruits (26:11). Thus, this would place a human face on poverty! The issue would not be "the poor" but specific individuals – "Ruth, Jeremiah, Ahaz, Yachob, David" – who were the Levite, alien, widow or orphan whom that Israelite family knew personally and cared about. This, in turn, would open the wellsprings of compassion of every family, so that all would be involved in eradicating poverty from the land.

Third, all of this would be done without spending a sheckle on administration! No bureaucracy would be needed to administer this system. It would simply require a commitment on the part of all to guarantee that no one would be excluded. What a powerful plan to make that nation, in every way, "a nation of priests" (Exod. 19:6), for it would be a nation with no poor among the people.

² Some biblical scholars view 26:12-15 as a separate feast associated with the offering of a third-year offering for the support of Levites and the most impoverished of the community. I believe there is more evidence for seeing this section as an extension of the First Fruits regulations.

Each Festival of the First Fruits would conclude with the head of the household reciting this prayer.

“I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans and the widows in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of your commandments. I have not eaten of it while in mourning; I have not removed any of it while I was unclean; and I have not offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the Lord my God, doing just as you commanded me. Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our ancestors – a land flowing with milk and honey” (26:13b-15).

Then, with the conclusion of this prayer, all regulations regarding the observance of the Festival of the First Fruits have been met, and the festival is finally completed. It has come to an end. Isn't this a remarkable piece of social and spiritual legislation?

Psalm 91 is a well-known psalm, assuring those who are faithful to God of his protection. But, while beautiful, it can also be somewhat naïve. It begins with what are the best lines of the psalm.

“You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust”. For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler” (91:1-4).

The image is of God as a great bird, protecting its chicks under its wings and keeping them from attack from other creatures, disease or from capture by humans. One is immediately reminded of Jesus' poignant cry to Jerusalem, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Matt. 23:37). Thus, in this psalm, God is envisioned as a protecting bird keeping its chicks from harm.

It is at this point that the psalm begins to go astray. The author, captured by his own poetry, begins to expect too much of God. “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes, and see the punishment of the wicked. Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent” (vv. 7-9).

The image changes in this section to a soldier in the midst of battle. Slaughter is going on around him, but he is kept safe by the intervention of God. Those who fall in battle, the Psalmist suggests, are “the wicked” receiving their just “punishment”. Because the one praying this psalm is not wicked, “no evil shall befall you”.

Would that it were so. But it is not. Bad things do happen to good and even Godly people every bit as much as they happen to ungodly people. Evil and misfortune happen to us all. So the author of this psalm is guilty of overstating his case.

It is at this point that the author realizes the precipitous direction in which he is heading. And therefore, he provides a last-minute correction.

“Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation” (vss. 14-16).

It is not that only good things happen to God’s people; bad things happen, as well. Thus, the Psalmist is asserting that God will not keep us from ever experiencing trouble. Rather, it is that God “will be with (us) in trouble”. It is that God will both be of support and encouragement to us when we face trouble, and will “show (us) God’s salvation”. The truth of this passage lies in its awareness that faith in God brings balance and perspective to life, so that one is better able to cope with the problem currently weighing one down. Thus, we can enter into the crises that face us with more equanimity because we know that this is not all there is to life and that we are surrounded with the love of God that will see us through to the other side! This is the wisdom of Psalm 91.

Luke 4:1-13 is the story of Jesus’ temptations by Satan. The first three chapters of Luke have clearly communicated to the reader that Jesus was born to be the Messiah of God and the Savior of Israel (2:11), God’s Son, “the beloved with whom (God) was well pleased” (3:22). But what sort of Messiah and Savior would he choose to be? What would be his objective for the liberation and salvation of Israel? Would he be a political leader, an economic reformer, or a religious leader? How would Jesus act out his Messiahship? The temptation stories tell us what strategies Jesus considered in order to bring about the “salvation of his people” (1:77).

Luke 4 begins, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil” (4:1-2a).

The story of the temptation is presented in both the Gospels of Matthew (4:1-11) and Luke (4:1-13). It is merely mentioned in Mark (1:12-13) and is ignored altogether in John. The story in Matthew and Luke is virtually identical except in two particulars. The second and third temptations in Luke are reversed in Matthew. And Jesus’ response in Matthew includes the full quotation of Deuteronomy 8:3, including the words missing from Luke, “. . . but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”.

Several things stand out in Luke’s temptation story. First, Jesus battles Satan with scripture. His rebuttal to each temptation is to use scripture as his defense. In the first temptation, he quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, for the second Deut. 6:13 and for the third Deut. 6:16.

Second, it is important to note that it is Deuteronomy that Jesus exclusively uses to resist Satan. He uses no other portion of the Hebrew scripture. Why Deuteronomy? Well, it is Deuteronomy that presents the most clearly articulated rationale of what Hebrew society was supposed to be – the world as God intended it to be. That world was built around creating a shalom community of political justice, economic equity and spiritual relationality. It is almost as if Luke wishes to

demonstrate that Jesus, in his ministry, was to be “Deuteronomy personified” – that is, that it would be through Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection that the Deuteronomic paradigm would be best lived out. It would be Jesus’ kingdom of God that would most encapsulate the Deuteronomic vision as it would be inaugurated through Jesus liberating ministry, redemptive death and society-shattering resurrection.

Third, this story reveals Jesus tempted by the seductive, Satanic side of each of the systems that ordered Israel’s life and the life of the world. The first temptation was to feed the world’s hungry and thus transform the distribution of wealth by giving allegiance to a satanic economic system. The second temptation was to rule the world’s political systems in a way that would bring about justice for all, but would only happen if Jesus would serve the satanic purposes of the political system. The third temptation was for Jesus to use his miracle-working power in order to gain control of the nation’s religious system, which had been given over to the satanic commitment to dominate and control the people and the other systems.

All three temptations were confronted through Jesus’ reminder to Satan of the intended nature of each of these God-created systems. God had created these systems to maintain a society of justice, equity and relationality. But Satan had used them to oppress, exploit and control. Each of Jesus’ quotations from Deuteronomy was from that section of Deuteronomy that summarized the nature and purpose of that particular system. Thus, Deuteronomy 8:3 is taken from that section of Deuteronomy dealing with the Jewish economic system as God intended it to be, Deut. 6:13 from that section dealing with the political system and Deut. 6:16 from God’s description of the religious system God intended Israel to create.

It was not simply that Jesus was quelling Satan’s arguments by throwing scripture willy-nilly at the devil. What Jesus was doing was reminding both Satan and himself what the systems that Satan was tempting Jesus to misuse was actually designed by God to be and do. The essence of Satan’s temptation of Jesus was not to lure Jesus to use society’s systems for evil ends, but for good. He was tempting Jesus to use systems that were beyond redemption, systems that had been so corrupted by humanity’s surrender to Satan – but to use them in order to do good! He could use these systems to eliminate world hunger, to adjudicate with justice, to accomplish deeds of healing and spiritual transformation. Satan was tempting Jesus to use evil systems to accomplish good!

But Jesus saw through this ruse. His use of the three Deuteronomic scriptures was, in essence, allowing Jesus to declare to Satan, “These systems cannot simply be reformed into God-based systems because their very foundations, as they are presently constituted, are built upon greed, power and control. They are Satanic in nature. Therefore, the only way the systems that order public life can be created as Godly systems of justice and the equitable stewardship of life is to be truly based in relationship with God. The systems – as well as individuals -- need to be converted. And that can only happen by starting all over again – by being new systems built upon a new order (“the kingdom of God”) that is centered on right relationship with God”.

The temptation that Jesus faced, therefore, was to simply seek the reformation of the systems. But such reformation would still be built upon allegiance to their satanic origins. Only a radical action, only liberation, only starting all over again would do. So Jesus avoided taking the easy

way out and set on a course to establish the kingdom of God, a course that would inevitably mean such conflicts with the established political, economic and spiritual order of Israel and of Rome that it would result in his death!

Once Jesus had rejected the temptation of Satan to use the corrupt systems of the world to do good to humanity, he had to seek a new way. That new way, the work Jesus would do to inaugurate God's kingdom of justice, equity and shalom is the subject of the next story in Luke. It is the declaration of his mission to the congregation in which he had been raised (see the Gospel commentary for the third Sunday in Epiphanytide), as he comes to declare to them the dawning of a new Jubilee in which God has called him "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of Jubilee" (4:18-19).

This story of the temptation of Jesus then ends on a most ominous note. "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time" (4:13). Satan wasn't finished with Jesus yet – as Satan is never finished with any of us! He simply bided his time until a more opportune moment would commend itself. This would not be the last temptation of Christ. But Jesus' conquest of Satan was sufficient for the moment!

Romans 10:8b-13 is Paul's clearest statement of the necessity of salvation through Jesus Christ. What is particularly intriguing about that statement, however, is how Paul builds that argument upon Deuteronomy.

Romans 10:8 is actually a quote from Deuteronomy 30:14. The Deuteronomist concludes his book with a sermon by Moses, the prophet's selection of Joshua as his successor and Moses' death. The point of that Mosaic sermon, however, is what Paul here quotes.

Moses has reviewed what God has done for Israel by liberating them from Egyptian slavery, preserving them in the wilderness, making covenant with them to be his "nation of priests" to the world, giving them the Ten Commandments and the statutes and ordinances that would enable them to build a society of justice, economic equity and a relational culture – a society captured in their celebration of the Festival of the First Fruits! In the light of this review, Moses calls Israel to make a decision – to "choose life" by choosing to follow the covenant God has made with Israel, and thus to choose salvation. Then Moses says these words to the children of Israel.

"Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (Deut. 30:11-14).

The word of God is a gift to the people of Israel, Moses (and Paul) is saying. It "is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart for you to embrace". And that word is a word of grace!

A primary theme throughout Deuteronomy is that Israel does not deserve all that they have. Rather, all that one has is a gift from God. Thus, even their covenant that shapes their life together is a gift of God to them. Their liberation as a people from Egypt and their subsequent salvation in the Promised Land was not brought about by their strenuous efforts, but by God's grace. Paul quotes this passage from Deuteronomy to remind his Israelite readers of this truth. He then presents Christ as being the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law – all that the Law was moving toward – but given to Israel and to humanity as God's free gift to them.

What, then, should we do in the light of God's freely given grace to us through Christ, Paul in essence asks? Why, Paul answers his own question, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth, and so is saved" (vss. 9-10). As God's chosen ones, you are already accepted by God. Now, your task is to accept that you are accepted – to believe it and to verbally confess it. So act your way into a new way of thinking by confessing Jesus as Lord, and you will discover that your sense of being accepted will follow your own witness!

What Paul was proclaiming was exceedingly hard for people of the first century to get their heads around. Jewish religious culture had been stressing for several hundred years that fastidiously obeying the Law was the way to win God's favor; salvation had to be earned. Likewise, Greek and Roman culture both stressed that one had to appease the gods and to curry their favor. Neither the Jewish culture of Paul's day nor the Gentile culture had any comprehension of grace. It was a thoroughly foreign concept to both Jew and Greek. Therefore, to bolster his argument, Paul returns to the Old Testament.

He quotes two prophets in rapid succession. First, he reminds his readers that Isaiah had said, "No one who believes in God will be put to shame" (Isa. 28:16). And the prophet Joel proclaimed, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32). God is there for the asking, Paul is declaring. He already loves you; he already has acted through the Law, and then supremely through Christ to provide for your salvation. You do not need to earn God's love, either by good works or observing the Law. All you need do to make that salvation realized in your life is to embrace it. And that salvation is for any who call on the name of the Lord – whether one is a Jew or whether one is a Gentile. For our God is one who "is generous to all who call on him"!

So, embrace what God has already done for you! And discover that it is, indeed, "amazing grace"!

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