

“THE GREAT SEPARATION”
Ezekiel 34:11-24, Romans 9:14-29
August 1 & 2, 2020

During my 2 week isolation while I was waiting to get my COVID 19 test results back, I had the chance to see two of my favorite trilogies. They are called “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Ring.” These two movies display a great struggle that is taking place in all of humanity, highlighting the difference between the free folk of Middle Earth and those dominated by the dark lord, Sauron. They also lift up the importance of each person’s decision of which side they will align themselves with.

We can use these two trilogies to look at what is happening to us in our own history, for you see there is a great separation between the two sides of good and evil, and the world, as we know it, is at stake. Our lives are lived as if on the edge of a knife, and if we but stray a little bit, we will find ourselves completely lost to all that is good and right in this world.

So as I watched these movies, it became very clear to me that each of us is in the midst of this same kind of struggle, one that encompasses all of humanity – the struggle between good and evil. The devices of evil are so powerful and many times so alluring, that they are hard to resist. The lure for power, fortune, pleasure and delight can completely over-take us, and if we are not very careful, they will become our god. We will find ourselves worshipping all the things of this world, craving more and more to the extent that we will give our all to satisfying them and having them in our possession.

Even when we are determined to stay on the side of good, evil is right there, knocking at our door, and sometimes even crashing through the door in order to make us subservient to its ways. The battle between good and evil is raging on in the center of each of our lives, and unless we are diligent at keeping evil controlled, we will find our lives turned completely up-side-down and our world will no longer be the same. It is a daily battle as to whom we will let become the lord of our lives – the one we call God, the creator of the heavens and the earth; or the one we call Satan, the dark lord given control over the face of the earth for a little while. Who will be our lord? Who will we allow to guide and direct our lives? And to what end will we go to make that happen?

We see the struggle in our Old Testament lesson of Ezekiel 34 today. God has called each of us to follow Him and when we follow Him, He expects us to abide by His guidelines. It's not about our ways and our expectations, but about following God's ways and God's expectations. Israel's leaders struggled to find the reason to follow the Lord God, instead giving themselves to satisfying their own wishes and desires (Ezekiel 34:1-10). They had the best of all that God had supplied, but they left God out of the picture and used their positions of power and authority to their own selfish benefit. This left the peoples under their authority defenseless, having to fend for themselves with whatever was left.

The leaders failed to look out after the poor, the sick, the hurting and the dispossessed. "*Instead [they] treated them cruelly*" (Ezek. 34:4). And as a result, the people wandered away, seeking to find their own way in life, trying to find safety and security in the mountains and hills, scattered over the face of the earth (34:5-6). They had no one to look after them, or to guide them under the ways of the Lord God, so they became prey to the surrounding countries. So God promised to judge the leaders, even taking their positions of leadership away from them in order that better, faithful leaders might be found to lead the people according to the ways of the Lord.

But the great separation was not just for the leaders to deal with. The choice of who would be followed also fell to the people, and we see that in our Scripture text for today (Ezek. 34:11-24). God stepped in to become the Shepherd of the country, calling back all those who had wandered away. He provided for His people so that they could find safety and security once again. But judgement also came to those who were abusing their own positions at the expense of those who were struggling more.

God uses the example of sheep because we are so much like them. God observed how the strong and the fat sheep took advantage of all of the blessings of God's provision, but they abused the weak, the sick and the injured, even butting them away from the good things that God was providing. These strong and fat sheep took their fill of the good pasture and clean water, but messed it up for the others, trampling down what they didn't eat and muddying what they didn't drink. Then those coming after them were forced to deal with the left-overs, the trampled grass and the muddy waters.

If we look seriously at what God is telling us through these verses, it may come as a great shock to us that even we might be those that will receive God's judgment because of the way that we have treated and dealt with the blessings in our lives. God states clearly, *"So now, I, the Sovereign Lord, tell you that I will judge between you strong sheep and the weak sheep. You pushed the sick ones aside and butted them away from the flock. But I will rescue My sheep and not let them be mistreated any more. I will judge each of My sheep and separate the good from the bad"* (Ezek. 34:20-22).

You see, the world we live in today wants to judge each other based upon their own laws, their own ways. They want to discard the laws of God and make up their own. They want to manipulate the peoples around them so that they might gain the best for themselves at the detriment of many others. They want to become the Lord of the people, but to do it in a way that only benefits them. So the sick, the hurting, the wounded and the oppressed get forgotten, or worse, pushed aside, just so the strong ones can continue their pursuit of domination over the others. And there are some, feigning to help the poor and sick and helpless, who see an opportunity to take control, but in ways that are much more disruptive and destructive, do their best at getting what they want, too. And everything gets turned up-side-down.

And God sees all of this taking place. He sees the great separation forming not only here in the United States, but throughout the rest of the world, where leaders and the powerful are striving hard to control the lives of others. They want to dictate how things should go based upon their own desires. But we are seeing that their ways are foolish, that they are even more disruptive, and that in neglecting the ways of God, we bring judgment upon ourselves.

So we are seeing a great separation shaping different sides where those who are desiring to live according to the ways of God are criticized, belittled, oppressed, persecuted and even put to death. People of faith are trying to live faithfully to the Lord our God, but are finding themselves being overwhelmed by the leadership of their countries, or oppressed by the wealthy and powerful, or even denied the life sustaining essentials. The good is becoming unlawful, the right is being condemned as wrong and the faithful are being punished for their faith. And at the same time, evil is being lifted up as

lawful and appropriate, and the wrong is being highlighted as being right. The world is turning up-side-down, my friends, and we must choose which side we will be on. Will we choose to be on the Lord God's side, doing our best to follow His ways and His will? Will we stand up against the evil that is charging at us, swords drawn seeking our destruction and occupation? Or will we quietly acquiesce to the demands of those who would take over the control of our schools, our cities, our counties, our churches and our country? Do we get so tired of fighting the good fight of faith that we finally lay down our weapons and our lives and give in to the domination of evil?

God tells us in Ezekiel 34:22-24, *“But I will rescue My sheep and not let them be mistreated any more. I will judge each of My sheep and separate the good from the bad. I will give them a king like My servant David to be their one shepherd, and he will take care of them. I, the Lord, will be their God and a king like My servant David will be their ruler. I have spoken.”* So don't give up. Don't give in.

God sees the great separation forming. In fact He is **instigating** this great separation so that the good and the bad will become evident to all. Sides are being drawn, my friends, and you are being called to join one side or the other. You are being called to choose which side you will serve. And that decision will determine the judgment we receive from the Lord God.

But God is not done calling us to follow Him. He has sent us a Savior to rescue us from the ways of evil. Jesus Christ has come to the earth to give us a way back to God the Father. Jesus has come to show us how we can regain the glory of God and find His presence with us. Jesus has come to set us free from the wages of sin and death. He paid the price for our sin by dying on the cross for us so that each one of us would not have to face that excruciating judgement on our own. He willingly gave up His own life so that as we come to trust in Him and believe in Him and claim Him as our very own Savior, His blood washes us clean from any guilt laid upon us. As we turn to become followers of Jesus Christ we are ransomed from the wrath of God and rescued to newness of life. As we turn our backs to the wicked and evil of this world, as we walk each day trying our best to follow all of His laws, God reaches out to us and gathers us into His sheepfold, and becomes our protector and provider.

The Apostle Paul shares this well in Romans. He lifts up the division that came to Israel because of Jesus. He identifies the two sides that are forming, one on the side of God and His ways, and the other on the side of the world dominated by Satan. He has lifted up the fact that we will be accused, that we will be condemned by the world as we come to follow Jesus Christ. We who chose to follow Jesus and all of His ways will be attacked, will be hated by the world, and will be put to death for our faith in Him. Yet Paul shares that once we have Jesus in our lives, there is nothing that will be able to separate us from the love of Jesus. The world will not be able to take away the love of Jesus Christ from us. Oh, they will take everything else away from us, but they cannot take us away from the love of Jesus Christ. Therefore we are safe and secure in the King that God has sent to us to be our Shepherd after the likeness of King David. Jesus is the Shepherd promised by God to Ezekiel who will guide us to life.

So very early in Romans 9 we hear Paul cry out for the sake of those who have chosen to rebel against God and His ways. He says, *“I am speaking the truth; I belong to Christ and I do not lie. My conscience, ruled by the Holy Spirit, also assures me that I am not lying when I say how great is my sorrow, how endless the pain in my heart for my people, my own flesh and blood? For their sake I could wish that I myself were under God’s curse and separate from Christ. They are God’s people; He made them His sons and revealed His glory to them; He made His covenants with them and gave them the Law; they have the true worship; they have received God’s promises; they are descended from the famous Hebrew ancestors; and Christ, as a human being, belongs to their race. May God, who rules over all, be praised forever! Amen”* (Romans 9:1-5).

The great separation was right there, separating the people of Israel into those following Jesus as the Christ and those refusing to accept Jesus as the Savior. And Paul cries out in agony for his own people, that they might find the ways of God and that they, too, might come to the ways of God and find His Salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul was willing to even give up his own salvation for the sake of those who were on the world’s side of the separation, if that would bring them back into the favor of God so that they could find the Way, the Truth, and the Life in Jesus.

This, my friends, is God's call on each of our lives, to be willing to give up all that we have in order to bring someone, even one, from the side of death and destruction into the side of life and prosperity. So I ask you, "What is the price of a human soul? What would you be willing to give in order to guide another person, our own flesh and blood, back into the ways of the Lord our God?" There is nothing more precious in this world to the Lord God than the redemption of a person from the ways of death to the ways of life. But if we seek to follow God's desire to save the life of all people, we will come under even more criticism and condemnation. The world does not want that to happen, so the great separation seeks to prevent anyone from changing sides. The battle rages on and the separation gets larger and stronger. But God continues to call out to those who are lost.

And we hear Paul explaining even more how the separation works. Listen to the last half of Romans 9 and listen to the reason for the separation. (READ Romans 9:14-29)

God knows our hearts. He already knows how we will respond to His Son, Jesus. We humans are locked into time and space, so our timeline is linear. But God is not limited to time and space, so He knows the past, He knows the present, AND He knows the future. God knows our beginnings AND our endings. He knows all our ways. Even before we speak, He knows what we will say. God knows each of our hearts and who will and who will not choose to follow Him. So God uses every person, good or bad, to bring about His glory. God "*will have mercy on anyone [He] wishes; [He] will take pity on anyone [He] wishes*" (9:15) in order to bring about His glory and reveal His power.

But there is one important fact that we often neglect to see. Paul states it well, "*so then, everything depends, not on what man wants or does, but **only on God's mercy***" (9:16). It's not up to us to determine who will and who will not follow the Lord. God is the One who decides how He will use each person based upon their decision of which side they will chose of this great separation. God will show mercy to the ones He knows will follow Him, The rest He will let go their own way, to their own destruction.

Look at how God used Pharaoh in Egypt during Moses' time. God knew that Pharaoh would not

humble himself to His demands, so through Pharaoh's hard heart, God used him to demonstrate His greatness. Each time Pharaoh said "No" to Moses about letting the people of Israel go from slavery, God demonstrated His power and authority over all the things of the world. Pharaoh thought he was god, so God humbled him through the hardness of his heart to truly show who was really the God of this world. So God can use the people of the side of destruction and death to bring about the great demonstration of His real and awesome power. But the choice is ours as to which side we will be on.

However, Paul then asks a great question. He says, "*But one of you will say to me, 'If this is so, how can God find fault with anyone? Who can resist God's will?'*" (9:19)? In other words, if God already knows all about us and has decided whom He will use and whom He will destroy, why are we condemned by God if we're just doing as He has made us to be? Because God already knows the choices we will make to either receive Him or reject Him. We make our own choice of life or death, blessings or curses, heaven or hell. God has offered us life, but it is our choice as to whether or not we will follow His ways in order to find it. But God already knows the end result. That is why He can easily tell us, "*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it*" (Matthew 7:13-14).

God has made each one of us the way that we are so that He may be glorified in each of us. If we are made common and ordinary, let us live to God's glory in the common ways. If we are made noble and special, let us live to God's glory in the noble and special ways we live. Everything depends upon God's mercy, but we have the choice to either follow Him or rebel against Him, even as we are. We make the choice.

So God desires that we see His power, so He uses those who reject Him, both common and noble, in ways that demonstrate His power. So He "*[endures] those who were the objects of His anger, who were doomed to destruction*" (9:22) and uses them to bring about His glory through their destruction. "*And he also wanted to reveal His abundant glory, which was poured out on us who are the*

objects of His mercy, those of us whom He has prepared to receive His glory” (9:23), so even though we are persecuted or beaten down or oppressed, God comes to the rescue to demonstrate His glory to the world. It all comes down to God’s ways as being the best way which lead us to life.

So the great separation presents itself in order to bring about the revealing of God’s power and His glory. The point is, however, that our eternal destination is decided upon which side we choose to be on. God’s ways bring us to life everlasting. The world’s ways of wickedness and evil bring us to death everlasting. A huge chasm between the two sides, and there is only one way to get from the way of destruction to the way of life – that is in the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Gladly, Jesus came to the world for all people. His initial focus was His own people, the children of Israel, but after they rejected Him as the Savior, Jesus opened up the Salvation of God to the rest of the world, so that everyone who believes in Him as the One who came to set the people free from sin and death, might find life. Because of the love of God for the people of the world, Jesus, the Son of God, came to bring us life, so that whoever believes in Him will be given the eternal life that Jesus gives (John 3:16).

Therefore, we who were not God’s favorite people are now called God’s people. Those of us where destined for destruction apart from Jesus Christ have now become God’s loved ones. And the countries who were told they were out of God’s mercy and grace, because of Jesus are now the very countries filled with the presence of God (Romans 9:25-26). The great separation comes through the belief in Jesus and in the rejection of Jesus. It is based upon which side we will be on.

As the madness of the world displays itself to us, it is clearly showing the great separation that is building today. There is a great division between good and evil, between the faithful in Jesus and the faithless of the world, between the right and the wrong, and between the just and the unjust. The choice we make as to which side we will follow determines how we will be treated here, AND how we will live in the eternity beyond this life. Therefore, choose wisely, my friends. Choose the ways of Jesus and live to the glory of God as you belong to Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.