

A Pew Can Be Purchased

Romans 9:1–5

THE HIGHEST BIDDER

In 1773, when Christ Church in Alexandria, Virginia, was completed, ten box pews were auctioned to help pay the cost of construction. George Washington purchased pew number five for thirty-six pounds and ten shillings, the highest price paid that day. It was an honored place, bought by the man who would become the nation's first president. This does not question Washington's faith. The point is simpler: even a faithful man could not buy what mattered most. Washington could purchase a pew in the church. He could not purchase a place in the kingdom of God. That place had to be given to him by grace, just as it must be given to us.

Paul begins Romans 9 grieving over his fellow Israelites. They possessed privileges: adoption, glory, covenants, the Law, worship, promises, patriarchs, and, according to the flesh, Christ himself. God entrusted them with his Word and brought forth the Savior through them. Yet many rejected the Savior toward whom those gifts pointed. Paul does not answer with contempt. He says he could wish himself accursed and cut off from Christ if that would save his kinsmen. Their unbelief wounds him because he feels their loss as his own.

KEEPING OUR SEAT

Paul then explains why God's word has not failed.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,

Romans 9:6

Physical ancestry never created faith. Isaac was born according to promise. Jacob was chosen before either brother had done anything good or evil. God's mercy is not a wage owed to the deserving. It depends on God, who has mercy. No one places God in his debt by bloodline, privilege, decision, or performance. Salvation begins and ends with divine mercy.

This warning does not elevate Gentiles over Jews. It humbles everyone. Even the most distinct bloodline changes nothing before God. Jew and Gentile, every

nation and race, enter the kingdom the same way. No one is saved by the blood in his veins. We are saved by the blood that flowed from Christ's veins. No one enters by family name, citizenship, culture, or heritage. We enter through the crucified and risen Son of God.

That brings us back to Washington's pew. He could purchase an honored seat in a church. He could not purchase righteousness before God. Neither can we. We readily turn religious blessings into personal claims. "I was baptized here. My parents helped build this congregation. I attended Sunday School. I was confirmed. I give generously. I serve faithfully. I know the doctrine. I have not lived like those people." Each may describe a real blessing or a genuine work. None of them establishes our standing before God.

Paul closes by naming Israel's error. Gentiles who were not chasing righteousness by the Law received it as a gift, by faith. Israel kept pursuing righteousness as something to be earned, and so many missed the righteousness God was giving away freely. They stumbled over Christ. They wanted a path walked by their own strength, while God offered a Savior who had to carry them the whole way.

We repeat that mistake whenever we keep score before God. We begin with grace and quietly return to wages. We hear that Christ forgives sinners, then privately reassure ourselves that we are more faithful, more useful, more respectable than others. This poisons church life. It produces proud longtime members, defensive leaders, suspicious factions, and impatience with sinners whose failures happen to be more visible than our own. We guard our place in the church as though it were Washington's private pew, forgetting that every place in Christ's church is occupied by someone who was let in by mercy alone.

THE SEAT ALREADY BOUGHT

Paul wished he could give his life for his people. Even if such an exchange were possible, his death could not have atoned for them, because Paul himself was a sinner. But what Paul could only wish for, Jesus has actually done for you.

The eternal Son took on your flesh and stood beneath God's judgment in your place. He was made a curse for you. He carried the sins of Jews and Gentiles, the

religious and the irreligious, the proud and the ashamed, and your sins among them. His blood has answered for your guilt. Three days later he rose from the tomb, and death has no more claim on you than it had on him. He ascended in full view of his disciples and is seated now at the right hand of the Father, reigning over every power that would tell you your place in his kingdom is still in doubt. He intercedes for you there even now. And he is coming again, not to audit what you have earned, but to finish what he has already purchased: to raise your body, to wipe away every tear, and to seat you at his own table forever.

Here is the difference on which everything rests: Washington purchased a pew, but Jesus purchased you. He bought you not with gold, reputation, or ancestry, but with his own holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. His righteousness is not a reward he hands to well-meaning Christians for good behavior. It is a robe placed over you while you were still exposed. Your faith does not add anything impressive to his finished work. It simply receives what he has already completed. Your empty hands receive everything, because his hands gave everything on the cross.

God delivers this to you through his means of grace. In Holy Baptism, he placed his name on you and joined you to Christ's death and resurrection. In Holy Absolution, he does not tell you your record has finally become respectable; he forgives your sins for Christ's sake, plainly and completely. In the Gospel, he creates and sustains the faith that receives all of this. At this altar, Christ gives you his true body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. None of these gifts prove you are better than the person kneeling beside you. They return you, again and again, to the only foundation that can bear your weight: Jesus Christ alone. Here rank, ancestry, respectability, and achievement fall silent, because none of them purchased your seat. Christ did.

MAKING ROOM IN THE PEW

Picture the Sunday a stranger, dressed for anywhere but church, sits down in the pew where a woman has sat every week for forty years. She arrives a few minutes before the service, finds her seat taken, and has a choice to make in about three seconds: reclaim what she has quietly come to think of as hers, or slide into the row behind without a word and let the stranger keep the seat. That three-

second choice is Romans 9 preached without a manuscript. She does not own that pew any more than Washington owned a place in God's kingdom. If she remembers that, she moves. If she forgets it, she guards a seat that was never actually for sale.

That is the shape of church life for the rest of us too. The lifelong member and the newcomer kneel at the same rail. The leader and the person in the last pew need the same absolution. We do not earn a warmer welcome by seniority, and we do not deserve a colder one by unfamiliarity. We do good works, and do them vigorously, not to buy a place, but because Christ has already given us one for free.

And we remember that God does not owe saving favor to any nation because of its heritage. America is not saved by its founders, and no country is guaranteed God's blessing by ancestry, history, or possession of land. Nations may be judged more or less just in their actions, and Christians should pray for wise rulers and for peace. But before God, every nation stands under the same Law, and every sinner is offered the same Christ. There is no national shortcut around repentance and faith.

Treasure the pews, the windows, the crosses, the hymns, and the faithful sacrifices handed down through this congregation. Give thanks for every heritage that has served the Gospel. But do not rest your weight on any of it. Washington's pew remains because history remembers who paid for it. You remain in the household of God because Christ remembers his promise. The stone over which pride stumbles has become the cornerstone beneath forgiven sinners. Bring no claim of ancestry, achievement, nationality, or good works. Bring only your sin, and Christ will give you his righteousness. A pew can be purchased. A place in God's kingdom can only be received, and in Jesus Christ, it already has been. Amen.

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