

## Our Present Respite

Romans 9:29

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Have you ever thought how significant it is that our history is divided into B.C. and A.D.? Now those of us here who regard Jesus as just another human being don't see it as significant at all. We say, "Oh it's just the result of our western civilization dominating the development of the present civilized world. As a result, our religion dominated the way we dated things." But those of us who do believe that Jesus is not just another human being but that he is the only begotten superhuman Son of the Creator of the whole universe, see it as unbelievably appropriate that you split history into B.C., Before Christ and A.D. or Anno Domini "in the year of our Lord" after Christ.

The reason is that we believe that just as in our retroactive dating system, the years were running down from 4000 to 3000 to 2500 to 2000 to 6 B.C., so, at that time, the whole race of mankind was beginning to decline itself and its basic selfishness was so diminishing its powers that the race itself could not continue. Then, at that time, God took that whole selfish strain in us human beings, and destroyed it in a supra-spatial, supra-temporal miracle in his Son Jesus. As Jesus rose from the dead, so a new unselfish strain was introduced into the world.

So, ever since that time there have been two strains in humanity. There has been the old 'Before Christ', selfish, carnal strain and there has been the 'After Christ', spiritual, unselfish strain. Now that truth loved ones, was put into words by Paul, if you like to look at the letter that he wrote to Corinth and it's First Corinthians 15.

First Corinthians 15:45-49, "Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam (that's Jesus) became a life-giving Spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust and as is the man of heaven so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven."

There are two streams in humanity and you actually at the moment are swimming in one or swimming in the other. Because I think some of us say, "Oh, do you mean that before Jesus, everybody was selfish and after Jesus everybody has been unselfish?" Well, the very facts of history show that that's silly, it's foolish.

No, it wasn't that before Jesus everybody was selfish and after Jesus everybody has been unselfish. But the fact was that God perceived the perversion in our natures that was being transmitted to the rest of us by our predecessors who had rebelled against Him. With his great computer like foreknowledge, He saw that that selfish streak would begin to dictate all our lives so that we wouldn't be able to escape from it at all and that's what many of us feel when we say, "the good that I would I cannot". God foresaw that.

He saw that we would never be able to escape from that selfish streak ourselves. So he took each one of us and he put us into a pre-creation death of his Son because the lamb was slain from before the foundation of the world. So, he put us into a pre-creation death in His Son and raised us up with Jesus as new, unselfish people so that we would then have a choice.

So actually in God's repair shop, on his shelves there is an unselfish, free, liberated version of you at this moment. That's what it means. That there is an unselfish spiritual version of you in God's repair shop at this moment and you are able through submitting to the Spirit of Jesus' resurrection, you are able to have that version made completely real in your life. You are able to trade in the old selfish, angry version, you are. That's what it means, loved ones.

That's why it's so important to see "Before Christ" and "After Christ". Do you see it's the vague shadowy awareness of that in mankind's memory? The vague shadowy awareness that some great change has taken place somewhere in eternity, some great transformation is possible of human nature. It's the vague shadowy awareness of that that made Hitler try to produce the perfect Aryan specimen of humanity. Do you see that? That's why they try it.

We're trying to produce our own imitations of what God alone has been able to do, which is to change each one of us and make a completely new version of us available in Jesus. It's that that prompted Mao to try to produce the perfect Chinamen, really. These dictators were not simply normal human beings, they were inspired by a whole spirit world that knew that something real had taken place like that and we must somehow prompt human beings to try to reproduce their version of it.

Oh, that's the whole key to the test-tube thing. Do you realize that? The issue is not the baby, you know. We will never produce life anyway. It'll always come from life even if we put it into a test-tube; it has come from a human being. But that's not the issue at all. The issue is that this is the latest attempt of genetic engineers to take the advantageous genes from different human beings and create a new human being. It's yet another attempt of us, men and women, to reproduce the change that God wrought in Jesus, from each one of us.

The tragedy is that while the secular scientists and the secular dictators really take that seriously, those of us who regard Jesus' death as not simply a result of a political assassination or an internal struggle in Judaism, those of us who think of Jesus' death as really significant, most of us reduce it and underestimate it. We reduce it to some kind of sacrificial offering that is meant to placate the creator of the universe so that we can go on sinning with impunity.

We misinterpret and underestimate the whole magnificent operation that God did in Jesus. I mean instead of seeing that God put us into Jesus, his Son and ended once and for all our old sinful, carnal human nature and reproduced in Jesus' resurrection a new version of ourselves that we are able to receive in this life by submitting to the Spirit of his resurrection, we keep on underestimating the whole death. We reduce it to the level of placating an angry God with the death of His Son.

Of course God is judging us day-by-day according to our response to the great miracle that he wrought in his Son, he is. He doesn't bother with that idea we have of a sacrifice that enables us to go on sinning with impunity. He is judging us all the time according to our response to the magnificent operation that he has wrought in Jesus. He judges each one of us by our readiness to take part in that. Our readiness to trade in the old selfish nature and allow the miracle that was wrought in Jesus to be made real in us and to receive a new liberated version of ourselves.

So day-by-day, he is judging us on the basis of that and, loved ones, the amazing thing is that the Father is judging us but his judgment is all the time being graciously mixed with mercy during this life. That's the truth. You remember, last Sunday we said that God is judging us on the basis of our

response to the change he has wrought upon us in Jesus and our willingness to take part in that change. And the incredible graciousness of the whole thing is that God judges us day-by-day but he mingles the judgment with mercy so that we will still have an opportunity to allow the miracle to be made real in us.

Now, that's what today's verse states, so, would you like to look at it and we could start on it together? Romans 9:29 and it's important to see it, loved ones, because it is incredible, the gentleness and the mercifulness of our Father.

Romans 9:29, "And as Isaiah predicted, 'If the Lord of hosts had not left us children, we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomorrah.'" That's the kind of respite that God gave to the Jews and gives to us lovingly. Mount Sinai, you remember, when God revealed the kind of life that he wanted them to live in the light of the pre-creation death of his Son and what he had wrought in their human natures. You remember, he revealed the Ten Commandments to them.

He also made available to them through the thunderings and the lightnings, the power that was provided by him to live that life. You remember that while he was doing that, they were worshipping the golden calf and exercising their own selfish lusts. At that time, instead of wiping them right out and judging them right then as they deserved to be judged, God held back total judgment from them to give their children a chance to enter into the miracle that he had wrought in his Son. That's what we mean by God's mercy.

God judges enough to bring home to them, "You're not living the way I want you to live, these selfish natures that you have are not the only thing available to you." God judges them again and again by sending them into the wilderness for 40 years to bring home to them, things are not as they're meant to be -- and yet he lovingly holds back the judgment from total destruction so that their children will have an opportunity to enter into the reality of what he wrought in his Son. Now, loved ones, that's how God explained it to Moses, if you just look at it in Numbers.

Numbers 32:13, "And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord was consumed." It ties up with the verse we're studying, you see. "If God had not left us children, we would have fared like Sodom and Gomorrah." In other words, the Israelites would have been completely wiped out, if God had not held back His judgment so that even though that generation was destroyed, yet their children still lived and had an opportunity to take part in the salvation that God had wrought in his son. It happened again and again, you know.

He took them right to the edge of Canaan, showed them the land they wouldn't enter in and therefore God said, "No, then none of this generation will enter and you'll wander for 40 years until you're all destroyed but your children will enter it." That is why Paul quotes Isaiah who says, "If the Lord had not left His children, we would have fared like Sodom and Gomorrah", and so it went on.

You remember, when they settled in the land of Canaan, they began to worship the idols and the counterfeit gods and the powers of the people around them and God again judged them for that. But he held back his judgment from destroying them totally so that at least their children would have an opportunity to enter it.

So, loved ones, that's the truth. Because of the miracle that God has wrought in his Son Jesus, he is always using his judgments with mercy and restraint. The whole purpose of the judgment is to

bring us to accept and receive by our willingness, the change that he has wrought upon us in his Son.

So all God's judgments in this present life are for that purpose. Now how does it work with us? First of all, the difference between us and Israel is God continues to give us respite from the absolute destruction of a universal flood during this life. After this life is over, his judgment will descend upon each of us without any restraint or holding back.

It's important, too, to see that the only reason we're all alive here today, is because God extends to all of us certain benefits of his Son's death -- certain gracious and merciful restraints that prevent us from entering into the total consequences of our own actions. Now if you say to me, "Could you give me an instance?" Easy.

All of us here will answer this question the same way; really I am sure of it. All of us at least who are over 10 or 11 anyway. Have you ever been in a situation in a car or in a disaster of some kind where you thought, "What on earth saved me from death? What saved me from death?"

You know, I don't think there's one of us here who has lived at all, who will not say, "Yeah, yeah, I remember a situation in a car where I just don't know what saved me. I came round the corner and I don't know why, I should have been dead." I doubt if there's one of us with sickness that have not had an experience of physical sickness that has made us feel, why should we be alive? What prevented us dying?

Do you see that our selfishness and our lack of love for other people have repeatedly produced in us a carelessness and a recklessness that should have killed us, except that God has built into the laws of the universe, certain mercy fail safes, the benefits of Jesus' death that hold back the total unrestrained outworking of His judgment upon us. That's why, loved ones. No, it's not chance -- that's stupid, you know. You have felt it yourself, haven't you?

You've said, "Oh that's just luck", and yet it's so outlandish that you can't believe it's luck. It's not luck. It's your Father graciously holding back, giving you respite so that you have another opportunity to deal with him about what he has done to you in his Son Jesus. That's the only reason we're all still alive, loved ones.

We all should be dead long ago if we got what we deserved for our actions. So, you see it is with every worry and anxiety that produces the headache and the ulcer. Why does the ulcer go on in some lives to bring death and in yours, you're still alive? Why have you been able to tackle the headaches with the aspirins and the other things and you're still alive? Yet the worry and the anxiety is absolute proof that you don't rest in faith and trust in your Father's care.

Do you see the explanation is that God lovingly holds back the full outworking and consequences of your own attitude to him so that it does not destroy you. So that you have a respite, so that we have a present respite from total judgment and have another chance, as the Jewish children did, to actually submit our wills to the deliverance from selfishness that God wrought in Jesus.

So it is with all debts, all the debts that we accumulate and the overdrafts because of our covetousness and our greed. If God allowed those to work themselves without any restraint in us, we would be dead. We would be dead from the sheer unbearable burden of it.

So it is with all the blind selfish ambition that fills us with jealousy and fills us with envy. If God allowed those things to work themselves unrestrained out in us, we would die. Our physical and mental frames would deteriorate with the strain. But, loved ones, we are still alive today because God has lovingly and graciously built in certain laws of his Son's death that hold back and restrain the total exercise of his judgment upon us.

As the world proceeds, it becomes more and more difficult for God's mercy to draw the world at all to himself. So, as our world proceeds, these benefits of Calvary, these fail-safe restraints upon judgment become less and less effective. You can see it coming up now. You know, there are bacteria now developing that are virtually immune to our antibiotics. You know that that's the fear in the back of medics' minds. They can tackle the present diseases but the whole fear of a thing like the Andromeda strain is that actually, there are developing now in our world, strains of bacteria that are immune to our antibiotics. The medics can see a time when we will be overrun by plagues because we will not be able, through God's grace that He has given us so far, to create antibiotics that stop them. That mercy will be withdrawn more and more because it will not be leading us to receive God. It will be leading us more and more to be indifferent to him.

That's the same in your life. The more you reject the deliverance from yourself that God wrought in Jesus, the more pointless and, indeed, the more harmful becomes the exercise of God's mercy upon you. Instead of leading you towards him, it leads you to an indifference to him and so he begins to withdraw that merciful restraint upon his judgments which you do deserve. So as your life proceeds, loved ones, your no's to God become more and more, I was going to say, serious. But the best word is 'fatal' because God himself is forced to withdraw his merciful restraint upon judgment and to let His judgment more and more exercise itself freely upon your life.

That's why, as the years go on, you get harder. That's why. You just get harder. That's why as you attend church more and more and you change less and less, you just become more and more proof against real Christianity. You become subtler in the way you hold God at arm's distance. What is happening is, he is being forced to withdraw his mercy more and more from you.

Now, loved ones, that's the fact. I felt that's the fact and the truth that God showed me in his word and I felt my job was to tell you that's what's happening. It's entirely up to you, you know, what you do. There was a verse that he showed me that I should read you, it's Romans 2:4.

Romans 2:4, "Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" That's where I want to leave it with you. Do you not know that God's kindness is to lead you to repentance? Let us pray.

Dear Father, we do see that there are countless things in our life that we cannot explain. There are incredible escapes that we have all had. There are incredible turns in our own financial fortunes that we cannot explain. We see now that it is not chance or luck. It is you lovingly preventing us from destroying ourselves by our own selfishness and our own carelessness. It is you, graciously extending to us mercy and that that mercy itself is part of the benefit of Jesus' death. Because the only reason you extend it, Lord, is to give us a present respite from judgment so that we will have an opportunity to accept our death with Jesus to ourselves and our own rights and instead to be changed by him and by his Spirit.

Lord, all we can do is thank you this morning for your mercy. Thank you for the judgments that we see in our lives, the broken limbs, the disruption that at times takes place in our lives, the

sickness that at times you allow to come to us. Thank you for the things that show us that things are not right and that there is judgment just waiting to burst upon us and that we must change. Lord, thank you.

Thank you for being gracious and loving to us and tempering your judgment with mercy. We would not take advantage of it. We would see that you are real and that you require from us a real response for your glory. Amen.