

Let God Be God

Romans Series

Romans 9:1-5

David Sunday

November 12, 2017

The heartbeat of the Apostle Paul as he opens Romans 9 is this: “Lord, why? Why was I made to hear Your voice and enter Your family while there’s room at the cross; while thousands make a wretched choice and rather starve than come? Why did You save me, Lord? Why were You merciful to me? O Lord, that You would stretch out Your victorious arm and gather in more and more and more people to enjoy these bounties that can only be found in Christ.”

In past years we’ve taught on Romans 1-8, but now we’re going to be in Romans 9-16. It may feel as though we’ve gone from the height of celebration at the end of Romans 8 and are now being plunged into the depths of lamentation in the opening verses of Romans 9. But I want us to see that both kinds of affections and emotions can and should co-exist in the hearts of every Christian. We should feel exuberant joy at the glories of the gospel, but also a great sorrow and unceasing anguish in our hearts for those who don’t yet know Jesus. It’s God’s will that both of these exist in our hearts. Let’s hear Paul’s heart, asking God by His Holy Spirit to create more of this kind of heart in us as we read Romans 9:1-5:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

May God empower the preaching of His Word by His Spirit today.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, “There is no better test of our spiritual state and condition than _____.” How would you fill in that blank? You could talk about Bible reading—how important it is to be in the Scriptures. You could talk about your prayer life, how vital that is. You could talk about love for the church and gathering together corporately. You could talk

about obedience to Christ's commandments and the pursuit of holiness. All of these are good tests of our spiritual state and condition.

But Martyn Lloyd-Jones put his finger on something we see so pronounced here in the Apostle Paul. He said, "There is no better test of our spiritual state and condition than our missionary zeal—our concern for lost souls. That is always the thing that divides people who are just theoretical and intellectual Christians from those who have a living and vital spiritual life."

If that's true—if Lloyd-Jones is on to something here—what does that say about your present spiritual state and condition? Are you burdened today about those who are lost and who don't know Jesus Christ? Are you burdened for those in your own family who have not yet entered in to those rich bounties that are spread at the table of Jesus for those who trust in Him? Does it grieve you that there are people in your life right now who are on their way to hell? Does it pain you? Can you say, "There is a continual sorrow in my heart as I think about the lost who don't know Christ"?

If there's not, would you not agree that something must be missing in your understanding of the gospel, that something must be defective in your enjoyment of God's grace in Christ? Even as we rejoice with Paul that "*I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,*" one of the first things we should do after celebrating the reality of the inseparable nature of our union with Christ is to simultaneously lament over those who are cut off from Christ and who don't yet know His grace and love and forgiveness.

My hope is that until Jesus returns there will co-exist in every member of New Covenant Bible Church two equally important gospel-driven affections. First, I hope we will always strive to be a people of unquenchable joy—joy unspeakable and filled with glory—because we are obtaining the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls. Oh, may we be a people of joy in the gospel.

At the same time, I want us to be a people who are marked by an unceasing sorrow. You might ask, "How can that be?" This was so in the Apostle Paul's life. In 2 Corinthians 6:10 he says, "*We are...sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.*" These two realities exist at the same time in the life of the Christian and in the affections of the church. Without both the joy in the gospel and the sorrow over those who don't yet know Christ, we're not really responding faithfully to the gospel. That's what we'll be thinking about and praying for today as we look at these verses.

Why Romans 9-11?

First, just a word about why Romans 9-11 exists in this letter. A lot of people stumble over this section. Some would prefer to fly straight from the end of Romans 8, with its wonderful crescendo of gospel truth, right into Romans 12, with its call to present yourself as a living sacrifice to God and all the implications of life that flow out of the gospel. But even though some people don't really know why chapters 9-11 are here, nevertheless they're integral to Paul's argument. They are not a detour.

In these chapters, Paul is exploring a profound mystery. Did you notice last week as we read Romans 1-8 how many times Paul said, "For the Jew first, and also for the Greek"? It was a phrase he kept repeating. The truth is that the gospel was promised beforehand through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures. It was through the Hebrew Scriptures that God gave us this gospel.

The Jews were the first to be entrusted with the oracles of God, so a real problem was brewing. As many Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ, the question was raised, "Why are so many Jewish people rejecting their Messiah? Has the gospel failed? Does it have no power? Has God somehow been unfaithful to His promises to Israel? If the Jews rejected Christ, can God's calling and purpose be rejected?"

Tim Keller phrases the question like this: "If God promised that Israel would be His people, yet most of them don't believe in Jesus, does that mean that God's promise, power or mercy is failing?" Because if it is then the whole cathedral of grace that Paul has erected in Romans 1-8 could come crashing down on our heads. How can we know that nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord if somehow God's promises to the Jewish people have failed? How do we know that God's promises to us will not likewise fail?

So Paul is going to go to great lengths to demonstrate the sovereignty of God and His faithfulness to His promise, as well as the fact that His plan is being carried out with perfection in the whole way the gospel has come and is spreading. He's going to give us a great vision of God's heart for the Jewish people in these chapters as well. In Romans 9-11, Paul is showing us that there's a firm foundation built under the truths of Romans 1-8. These gospel truths are on a foundation that doesn't have a crack in it, therefore when we trust in Jesus, we're standing on a solid rock, not on shifting sand. You can trust in the promises of God.

Before we delve into all the great mysteries and profound doctrines of the sovereign grace of God that are outlined in this chapter—perhaps more brilliantly than anywhere else in the New Testament—we need to understand the emotional life of the kind of person who loves these

doctrines and who also loves people. Sometimes we want to dive into the doctrine and get all philosophical, trying to figure out what's right and what's wrong, completely missing the heart that was beating in the Apostle Paul as he wrote these words. This is not an "ivory tower" theologian writing. This is the theologian of tears. He's writing with great passion—even anguish—in his heart over those who are lost. We're not really ready to grapple with the doctrines of God's sovereignty until we've cried out to God to give us the kind of heart the Apostle Paul has in these verses.

Paul's great sorrow and unceasing anguish (9:1-3)

Let's consider together Paul's great sorrow and unceasing anguish for his fellow kinsmen—the Israelites, the Jews—many of whom were rejecting their Messiah. Some of them thought Paul was a sell-out because he was preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. He was saying God would save both Jews and Gentiles by faith in Christ alone, that it's the same way for all. They felt Paul was jumping off the Jewish ship in order to ride the wave of Christianity as this gospel message spread throughout the Roman Empire. They charged Paul with being indifferent to the Jews and their faith, to being a traitor to his own nation. The very thought that anyone would suggest that Paul was indifferent toward his fellow Jews pierced him to the quick. His heart was filled with intense grief. He was so serious, so solemn, in these words.

He tells us in three different ways, "You can really trust that what I'm saying right now is true." He first says, "*I am speaking the truth in Christ.*" In other words, "I am fully aware that Jesus is looking down on me as I speak these words. He knows what's in my heart." Then he reinforces the positive statement with a negative: "*I am not lying.*" Then he says, "*My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit.*" In other words, "Christ and the Holy Spirit, Who know my heart, know that I'm not faking it. I'm not being a phony when I tell you, '*I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.*' Yes, I am rejoicing when I write Romans 8. My heart is soaring to the heights of God's love and grace, and there is exuberant joy in my heart. But at the same time, there is unceasing sorrow and anguish." Paul has the deep kind of joy that makes a person serious about the gravity of hell and the reality that there are people they love who right now are teetering on hell's precipice. Do you have that kind of joy? That deep, solemn, grave kind of joy?

Back 2011 a man was told at the age of 62 that he had terminal liver cancer and he only had about six more months. So he decided to write a journal reflecting on his meditations on Scripture. He worked for the Banner of Truth Press and they published it three years after he died. He reflected on these words in Ecclesiastes 7:3-4: "*Sorrow is better than laughter, for by*

sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” Listen to what this man, Douglas Taylor, wrote about these verses which are not against joy, but against folly.

“Those who have experienced deep joy have discovered a strange thing: that, in its poignancy, it is closer to sorrow than it is to mirth.” There’s a real deep joy that in its poignancy is closer to sorrow than to mirth. What is mirth? It’s what people are doing every night with late night television. “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. Make me laugh. Make me laugh. Make me laugh.” It’s shallow and superficial. Douglas Taylor is saying there’s something closer to sorrow than to mirth in joy. He continues, “The deepest joy carries with it a pain and a longing that truly make the heart better, whereas the laughter of fools in the house of mirth undoubtedly makes the heart worse.”

Here’s the key to understanding what’s going on in Paul’s heart here: “Deep seriousness is not at all an enemy to joy, only to folly. The thoughtful consideration of the end of all men is also likely to produce sobriety, a quality in which the professing church today seems lacking.” If we thoughtfully consider the fact that here in this beautiful, prosperous Fox Valley, every day we have neighbors who are dying and going to hell, that would produce in us sobriety. And some of us aren’t thinking about it enough.

Paul doesn’t tell us directly until chapter ten why he has this unceasing anguish. It’s because so many of his fellow Israelites are not yet saved. They’re jealous for God, but they don’t have true knowledge. They’re trying to establish their own righteousness before God instead of submitting to the righteousness from God through faith in Jesus Christ. They’re lost. Paul knows that apart from Christ, there is no righteousness before God. Apart from Christ there’s only everlasting loss and damnation. Paul understands this. He believes that nothing matters more for all eternity than that you are united to Jesus Christ by faith. He also knows that nothing is more dreadful than to be cut off from Christ for all eternity.

What’s that like? Christopher Ash imagines it like this. “To be cut off from Christ is to be like an astronaut whose line to the space craft has been cut, drifting off into space, still with a semblance of life, but doomed.” That’s dreadful. That’s frightening. Paul feels the weight and gravity of the wrath of God on those who do not believe. He feels it and he trembles at the precipice from which he has been snatched back and rescued. He smells the flames of hell and knows the only way to be delivered from that wrath is through Jesus Christ, Whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood to be received by faith. He agonizes over his relatives and kinsmen who have rejected the only sacrifice that can turn aside God’s wrath from them. That’s what’s going on in his heart.

So great is his love for his fellow Jews that Paul says in verse three, *“I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.”* Accursed. *Anathema* is the word that is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament when Joshua and the Israelites would go and plunder the other nations. They were not to take hold of the booty from the other nations, because that was *anathema*. That was devoted to destruction. When Achan did not listen to the word of God and kept those items that were devoted to destruction, Achan and his whole family were *anathema*—devoted to destruction.

So when Paul says, “I could wish that I myself were accursed,” he’s not just saying, “You can take me out of church membership so that the Jews don’t resent me.” He’s saying, “Oh, no. I could wish that I were under God’s eternal damnation, if it would save my fellow Jews.” He knows that’s not possible, so he doesn’t wish it. He speaks in the imperfect tense. It’s not possible that any human being like Paul or like you or me could be severed from God’s love in Christ.

He’s just said that in Romans 8:29-30: *“Those whom he foreknew he also predestined...And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”* Paul knows, “I am kept secure in the love of Christ and nothing can sever me from that love. So I could wish. The thought enters my mind—if it were possible.” But then he realizes, “No, it’s not allowable. It’s not possible, because there is only one Man Who could stand in the place of sinners, take the wrath they deserve and deliver them from destruction—and His name is Jesus.”

Paul’s heart beats with Jesus-like love in these verses. He sounds a lot like Moses in Exodus 32 when the people sinned greatly. Moses goes to the Lord and pleads for atonement for their sin. He says to the Lord in verse 31, *“Alas, this people have sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.”* But the Lord says to Moses, *“Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.”*

In other words, every man has to be accountable for his own sin. No human being can be a ransom for another—except for One Who is not only fully man, but also fully God. He Himself came to be the ransom for many. He Himself was cut off in order that we might enter in to all the blessings that are found in Him. Praise God that what was impossible for Paul to do was possible for Jesus to do for you and me. Praise God for the great salvation we have in Christ. Praise God that we can rejoice in hope of the glory of God, because we are now standing in a grace from

which nothing can sever us. Praise God for that hope and glory that we're looking forward to through Christ.

Do you believe in hell?

Even as we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, we grieve over those who are cut off from this hope of glory, don't we? I ask you friends, do you believe in hell? Really?

I heard of a British woman of high standing going into one of those Anglican cathedrals, listening to the service. At the end, the dean of the cathedral stands and greets the people at the door. She asks him, "Is it true, Dean, that there is a place called hell?" To which the dean replies, "Madam, the Scriptures say so, Christian people have always believed so and the Church of England confesses so." To which she responded, "Then, in God's name, why do you not tell us so?"

Why does it seem like you don't really believe it? Christian, do you believe there's a place of everlasting punishment, because sin is an infinite crime against a holy God? Do you believe that in that place people will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction—destruction not of being, but of wellbeing; not annihilation, but on-going destruction. They will be away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might. Do you believe that there's a place of everlasting darkness, a night where there's no moon and no stars and no morning? It's a place of everlasting fire, where there's everlasting weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. A place of everlasting contempt, for all those who reside there despise, belittle and disregard one another and have no love for each other.

Do you believe that God has reserved everlasting chains under gloomy darkness for those who will not repent and believe in Jesus? Do you believe in the everlasting worm, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched? A place where that worm gnaws on your conscience day and night, because there is no longer any possibility of forgiveness of sin or release from shame and guilt? Do you believe in hell? This is how the Bible describes it.

Suppose a friend of yours who was not a Christian comes to know the Lord Jesus. Then she walks up to you at work or school and says, "I've just heard the greatest news ever! I have to tell you—do you know that Jesus died to rescue you from the guilt of your sins? Do you know that Jesus died so that you could be saved from hell and forgiven?" And you respond to your friend, "Oh, yes, I know Jesus. I am saved." Would there be any friend in your life who could look you in the eye and say, "Then why were you so indifferent about me and my salvation that you never told me about this? Did you not care?"

When I hear Paul describe his great sorrow, his unceasing anguish, I'm convicted. I've got a measure of this in my heart. I know what he's talking about, thankfully. But I feel like a child kind of looking at a warrior in battle and thinking, "Boy, I don't even know if I can relate to the depth of what's there in Paul's heart. I need more of this." Friends, as I was studying these verses, I thought, "This is what the Holy Spirit wants to forge in our hearts here in the Fox Valley." Oh, how we should tremble at the prosperity that blinds the hearts and minds of so many, including ourselves. The way the sun shines on us day after day, not literally but figuratively.

Tim Holloway and I were talking recently and he said, "You know, I pity the person who's life is always sunshine, because you know what a life of continual sunshine brings? It brings you into a desert." The prosperity of our region has the effect of numbing our souls to the reality of God and eternity and judgment, to the point that we are not listening, not believing and not trembling over these things. We do not feel this sorrow. We do not experience this unceasing anguish the way Paul did.

What if every member of New Covenant Bible Church could honestly say before Christ, with the Holy Spirit testifying to our conscience, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart for my fellow classmates at Elgin Community College, for my colleagues at work who don't know Christ, for my children who are not walking with the Lord"? Can they hear it in your prayers? Can they feel it in your embrace, that though you rejoice in all the ways they are achieving good grades and succeeding in their careers, that there is in your heart a sorrow, an anguish, that no human achievement is going to take away, that only will be resolved when they repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and know that their sins are forgiven, that they have eternal life?

Are you grieved at the prospect of loved ones experiencing everlasting darkness, everlasting punishment, everlasting fire, everlasting destruction, everlasting contempt and confusion and shame? Do you think that the Fox Valley would stay the same if, in our Wednesday night prayer meeting, and in our small groups, and in our elder meetings and deacon meetings and staff meetings and Bible studies, this kind of sorrow and anguish were being breathed out in our prayers for this community? Would things stay the same? Have we ever tested that? Do we know this in our hearts? Is there any sense we could smell the fires of hell and that we really believe there are people in our lives who are heading there?

Do you think we'd be more attentive and less indifferent to the barista at Starbucks, the cashier at Aldi, the waiter at Colonial Café, or the nurse who's been up all night serving us at Delnor Hospital? Would it temper our political fervor if we really carried this kind of sorrow and

anguish in our hearts for President Trump, for the members of Congress, for our nation that's lost without Christ? How would you be different if God, through His Holy Spirit, gave you just one-fifth of the sorrow and anguish that Paul had for his loved ones who did not know Christ? Just a fifth. Who in your life would most likely feel the impact of this kind of godly, prayer-inducing sorrow and anguish? Is there anyone you'd be moving toward in love right now if only your emotional life were more in tune with the heartbeat of Christ and His Apostle's anguish for the lost? Could we ask God about that? Could we pray for that? Could we labor for more of this in our prayers?

The greatest tragedy of all is in verses four and five which explain that Jesus came to His own and His own people did not receive Him. The very people who should have recognized, welcomed and embraced their Messiah instead despised Him, rejected Him, betrayed Him and crucified Him. All their religious privileges were pointing to Him. They were Israelites. They had the adoption as sons which should have made them receptive to Jesus when He said, "You can call God your Father when you trust in Me and you will receive the Spirit of adoption and cry out, 'Abba, Father' when you put your hope in Christ" (Romans 8:15).

The glory that shone in the pillar and the cloud, in the tabernacle and the temple, through the covenants with all their promises—they're all crying out for fulfillment in Jesus Christ. They had all these privileges. And the greatest privilege of all was that from their race according to the flesh is the Christ, the son of David, the Messiah. Paul doesn't say that Christ belongs to his fellow Jews. He says Christ the Messiah came from the Jews. Jesus is a Jew. He came from them, but He does not belong only to them, because He is "*the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.*"

I love how Christopher Ash puts it: "Christ can never be like a trophy, kept in a glass-fronted cabinet as if to say, 'He belongs to us,' for He is God over all, and all need to bow the knee to Him." How tragic to have all these privileges, to be the ones from whom the Savior of the world came, to realize that in rejecting the One Who came from them in order to bring salvation to them and to the nations, they were not only rejecting one of their kinsman as son of David, they were rejecting God Himself, the Messiah Who is Himself God.

What do we do with these verses? First of all, it should kill any anti-Semitism that might be lurking in any of our hearts. It should kill that off when we hear Paul's great sorrow, unceasing anguish and love for the Jewish people. We should realize we wouldn't have Christianity if it weren't for the Jews. Our faith is Jewish, for we trust in a Messiah Who is a Jew. And we should be having the same heart that Paul has for the Jewish people.

These verses should also speak to us Gentiles who have a close relationship to the Christian church. It should speak to us who grew up in the church, who've known the Bible since we were eating Gerber's baby food, who've listened to hundreds if not thousands of biblical sermons, who have sung praises to God in the congregation of the righteous, who have experienced glimpses of His grace and glory in the worship of His people, who have felt the piercing conviction of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of His Word. These verses, friends, should make us tremble, should give us pause, should prompt a serious probing of each of our hearts and not let us rest until we can say with assurance, "Have I embraced the Christ to Whom all these precious privileges point? Am I trusting in Him alone?"

It's terrifying that there are some here today who are so close to the gates of heaven, but if you were to die today, you would spend eternity in hell. It's terrifying to know that the greater the privileges you've experienced—the closer you've gotten to the gates of heaven—the greater will be the condemnation if you ultimately refuse to humble yourself, to bow low and enter through the narrow door Who is Jesus Christ. How terrifying to reject Him when you're right at the gateway to heaven in His church. John Bunyan thought about this in The Pilgrim's Progress when he wrote, "I saw that there was a way to Hell, even from the Gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction."

Dear friends, the reality that grieved the Apostle Paul in Romans 9 is no less grievous, no less urgent, no less consequential today in the 21st century. What's at stake is either heaven or hell. Loved ones, hear my heart when I say to you that there are religious unbelievers—people who are very close, who have great privileges, but who nonetheless do not embrace the Messiah. That reality must either grieve you deeply in your heart or I fear it may describe you. Because to not be grieved by this reality calls into question, "Am I one of these religious unbelievers? Am I just playing with these privileges, or have I really embraced the One to Whom they point?"

If it grieves you, embrace that grief and express it through prayer for those in your life who are not yet in Christ, that they may be saved. If it describes you, know this: it need not define you forever. Today you can repent and believe and turn to Jesus in desperation, asking Him to save you. Lord, I plead with You for more of the Apostle Paul's heart to grip our church and to grip me. I pray, Lord, that I would not be lulled into a slumber of complacency by all the wonderful gifts that are all around us in our culture and our society, the beauties of nature and all the things You've provided for us. May these not lull us into a slumber of complacency that is so far removed from the heartbeat of this Apostle that we could go a week without praying for loved ones who don't yet know Christ and pointing them to Him. O Lord, how desperate our spiritual condition is if we are not moved by the plight of those who do not yet believe.

We're asking, Lord, by Your Holy Spirit that You would renew and revive in us this kind of gospel-driven affection for lost people, that You would be glorified and that they would be saved. I pray for anyone here right now who realizes, "I've had all these privileges, but I have been resisting submitting myself to Christ." O God, arrest that person today and do not give them rest until they repent and believe in Jesus. (And if that is you, call on the name of the Lord Jesus and know that He hears you and He is mighty to save.) Lord, stir in us this missionary zeal, this heart of love, this anguish and sorrow, that more people in our lives might know Your great salvation. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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