

God's Election

Romans 9:1-5

¹ I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— ² 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 own people, my kindred 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 them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

It is rare that we gather on Sunday morning without someone bearing a broken heart. As we said on last Sunday, life is full of heartbreak, big and small, from daily disappointments to life-altering destruction. We are touched by death, divorce, conflict, job loss, financial woes, wayward children, elderly parents or spouses, illness of ourselves or our loved one, and aging. Almost all of us know someone who is ill from the coronavirus or who has tested positive, or at least came in contact with someone who tested positive. There are some of us who might want to respond to the customary "How are you?" with Paul's words: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" (v. 2). However, the norms of polite behavior and society, governing even our worship services, dictate that we keep silent about our deepest distress. Yes, we call out the names of many, but we seldom name the issues that really keep us up at night.

Paul will have none of that. In this letter that might have been read in a Roman worship service, he speaks of his own despair. After some of the most inspiring testimony in all of Christian Scripture (chapter 8), where Paul announced, "For I am convinced 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" (8:38-39); he seems to break down, fall apart, with grief over the failings of his own people to receive God's gift of the gospel. He is so distressed that he is willing

even to surrender his own relationship with Christ, if only the Israelites could see what they have. These are members of the family who have excused themselves from the dinner table, and he will give up the most precious thing he has in order to get them back.

All of us have histories of conflict, within the church or in our families; things that happened in the past or recently; these griefs can bring unspeakable pain. Brokenness in the world, in the church, in our own lives, when it is deeply felt, wounds us that way: it breaks our hearts. In an irony of faith, it may be that this is the way we come to know the strange workings of God in our lives.

The rabbis note that God writes the word, the law, on the heart rather than in it (Jer. 31:33). They say this is so that, when the heart breaks, the word falls into it. Absent the heartbreak, the word is never internalized as completely. Maybe this is how we come to know God, when God enters our hearts as fully as we have entered God's, and we share some of the pain of God's love rejected. Because surely God, embodied in the Messiah (v. 5), grieves at our refusal to be part of the blessed community (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34).

Each of us, like Paul, are aware of our own sorrows related to the church. Who have you witnessed to and despite your best efforts, the person stilled seems to have turned away. Even when we give it our all, there are some who will refuse to receive the gift of salvation. We each acknowledge our personal disappointment and grief, when a loved one rejects the grace and love of God. **Martha C.**

Highsmith

In order to put Paul's depth of feeling in context, we must reflect back upon Paul's journey of Christian discipleship. On the road to Damascus from Jerusalem, Saul of Tarsus dramatically encountered the living Christ. Because of his personal meeting with the risen Christ, Saul's life changed forever. Only such a profound experience could possibly explain his dramatic transformation from the zealot,

holding the cloaks of Stephen's murderers, to the passionate missionary for Christ. Paul has spent his life traveling the Roman Empire, teaching and preaching the good news of Christ, primarily to the Gentiles but also to his own family. The constant grace, love, and mercy he experienced in his life with Christ enabled and empowered his life's work, even in the face of beatings, harsh imprisonment, and church conflict. So, Paul had a burden for the salvation of those who were members of his nation and religion.

Ours is a self-help culture, though, and it is easy to believe that fixing things is all up to us. Paul himself appears to fall into this trap, offering up his own soul to be cursed in exchange for the enlightenment of his fellow Jews, as though God would be persuaded by such a swap. Some of us believe the problems of the church can be cured by better preaching, stronger outreach, more fervent prayer, or increased giving. Others of us despair that anything can be done and, instead of staying around to turn off the lights, we want to quietly slip out the back door. What we all need to remember is that God is in charge—that the fate of Christianity does not rest entirely on our shoulders. As a child I sat through many sermons with fear and trembling about God's election and was afraid that I was not one of God's elect. **Mary Beth Anton**

What we learn from this scripture is not about which humans get saved and which humans are damned. No. Paul's message is about God and the steadfast mercy of God. What else does Paul know as a certainty? He knows the cross. He knows Christ crucified. He knows that the crucifixion of Christ represents the "love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39). What Paul knows without a doubt, what stands as the cornerstone of all other knowledge, is that the one who was crucified, the one "whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement" (3:25) in our place, has been raised. He knows that "Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the

Father" (6:4). Paul knows God's love and God does not desire that any be lost!

Kyle D. Fedler

We need not be afraid, preacher and member alike, the last words of the text are perhaps the most important, when Paul turns from his own despair to proclaim again the power of the Messiah "who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen" (v. 5b). It is that hope that puts our own losses and failures in the right context.

Martha C. Highsmith

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