

# **An Anguished Heart**

**Scripture: Romans 9:1-5**

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People of God: As soon as you beginning reading chapter 9, you immediately detect a new topic and a new mood from what had gone on before. Chapter 8, one of the most powerful chapters in the entire Bible, ends with a triumphal note of the absolute certainty of our salvation. Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is Christ Jesus our Lord.

But in contrast, chapter 9 begins with deep sorrow and personal anguish. Paul seems willing to give up the certainty of his own salvation, negating, even undermining the powerful conclusion of the previous chapter. Why this switch in mood? Because of the unbelief of his fellow Jews. Paul wrestles with the fact that those who should have received the Messiah with open arms, the people of Israel, have in the majority, rejected Jesus as the Messiah. This spiritual condition of the Jews is what Paul wrestles with in the next three chapters.

Tonight we begin a new section in our study of the book of Romans. Romans can be divided into three major sections. Chapters 1 through 8 deal with the plan of salvation. Chapters 12 through 16 deal with the application of this salvation to our lives. In between, we have these three chapters, chapters 9, 10 and 11, that focus on the question of Israel's unbelief and how that fits into God's plan of salvation.

Opinions vary among scholars about the place of these chapters in the overall argument of Romans. Some see these chapters as a digression, a detour, which gets into an obscure topic. A type of appendix, which can easily be overlooked. After all, you could go from chapter 8 straight into chapter 12, without sensing that you missed anything.

On the other hand, others have argued that this focus on the unbelief of Israel is at the heart of the letter. After all, the theme of Romans, as announced in chapter one is that the gospel is the power of God for the

salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. In some ways, chapters 1-8 focused on how Gentiles have received this salvation. Now the focus is on how the Jews have reacted to the gospel.

It has to be admitted that these three chapters contain some very complicated and controversial issues. It deals with topics like God's election and his freedom to save those whom he chooses, which raise a whole host of questions. In my catechism class, nothing gets the questions going like the topic of election. Well, in chapter nine, that is a topic you simply cannot avoid.

So why deal with these chapters? Isn't the topic irrelevant? After all, what has the rejection of Israel of Jesus as the Messiah got to do with us today? Isn't it too hard? After all, if dealing with God's election gets us into complicated and controversial material, won't it better to stay with the simple call to faith?

Despite the fact that these chapters at first reading seem irrelevant to us and too hard to wade through, nevertheless, we will work through them. As we do so, we will discover they are not irrelevant, but are vitally important to a proper understanding of the gospel. And though it may require some hard work, in the end, we too will join with Paul in giving all the praise to God, saying with him at the end of chapter 11: *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!*

So let me at the very beginning of dealing with these three chapters, answer the "so what?" Why study and deal with these chapters? Let me give you four reasons.

First, because they answer how we, who are Gentiles, fit into God's plan of salvation. We are not Jews. We are not the descendents of ancient Israel. Yet, we claim the OT as our own. We look to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as our forefathers. Their stories are our stories. We claim the promises of the covenant as our own promises, as evidenced at every baptism. We sing the psalms as our songbook and our prayer book.

Most of the time, we think nothing of doing these things. But how can we? Have we stolen these things? The Jews today think so and find it offensive that we claim Abraham as our forefather. Yet we feel we are heirs of covenant promises given to him.

These chapters explain how we as Gentiles are part of a tree that is Jewish in origins. There is, or should be at least, a "Jewishness" to the Christian faith. We are people of the OT as much as of the NT.

Second, we need to study these chapters because they deal with the role of the Jews in the continuing history of salvation. After the majority of Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah, did they cease to be God's chosen

people? Or do the Jews today, still have a special relationship with God? Do they have to turn to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior or does God have a separate plan for them?

These questions are hot topics issues today. Jews have not always received a warm welcome in the midst of Christian communities. Anti-Semitism has a long history, climaxing in the Holocaust. After that tragic event, can one even suggest that evangelism to the Jews should still continue?

Others teach that God has a separate plan for the Jews. This teaching has a great impact on how you view the modern day nation of Israel, and the Middle East peace process. For some, these important political issues are directly rooted in their views of God's plan for the Jews after Jesus. That's what these chapters address.

Third, as these chapters wrestle with God's election and Israel's rejection of Jesus, it raises questions about God's election today and those who reject the message of Jesus. What about those who in baptism have received the sign and seal of the covenant, but who latter on in life reject its promises? Is God unfaithful to his promises? Has his word failed? Is God unjust in his electing love?

These are troubling questions, often faced by believing parents over their unbelieving children, or believing spouses concerning their unbelieving spouse. This is as personal as it can get. These are hard questions that need to be faced.

Fourth and finally, we deal with these chapters because they deal with the need for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. They provide the theological basis for evangelism and missions, like no other section in the Bible. Too often people think that election and evangelism are opposites, but in these chapters, they are brought together (as they are in our confessions). To jump over these chapters is miss dealing with the call to evangelism.

These four reasons are why it is important for us to deal with these three chapters. Despite what seems to be obscure topic, despite what will at times be complicated and controversial statements, it is important for us to wrestle with these issues.

But what leads to this discussion? What is the problem being addressed? The first five verses of chapter 9 describe the problem that Paul answers in the rest of this section. Let's hear these verses again. READ VS 1-5.

Paul is in personal agony here. He talks about his great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart. And he underscores the sincerity in expressing these emotions. He isn't just saying this in order to score points

with his fellow Jews. No, by three different oaths, he underlines his concern for his fellow Jews, for those who have not accepted that Jesus is the Messiah.

Paul is truly concerned about the spiritual well being of his fellow Jews. He sees what has happened. While the first disciples were all Jews, and while the gospel was preached in the Jewish synagogues as the gospel spread out of Jerusalem, Jews soon became a minority in the first century church, as Gentiles responded more positively to the gospel than the Jews. Paul's heart went out to the Jews. He would do anything, if only they would believe. He was even willing to be considered cursed, quietly literally damned, if only his fellow Jews would be saved. Martin Luther made the comment: "It seems incredible that a man would desire to be damned, in order that the damned might be saved." Yet that was Paul's passion for the lost.

Paul was astounded at the rejection of the Jews. After all, they had all the advantages. Paul lists eight special privileges the people of Israel, the people of God, had throughout the OT. They were the ones whom God chose as his special people. They were the ones who receive the promises of the covenant. They were the ones who received the law. They were the ones with whom God dwelt, via the temple. They were the ones through whom the Messiah himself was born. They had all the advantages. Yet the majority rejected what God had done for them, in sending his one and only Son. How is that possible? That is what Paul agonizes over.

We continue to see that rejection continue to this day. The majority of Jews still reject the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. Yet of all the people in the world, they should know better. For you see, when it comes to evangelism, reaching out to the Jews is different than reaching out to those who hold to Islam, or Buddha, or those who follow the secular ideologies of our time. Jews are in a different category all their own, because we share so much together. They are so close to the truth, yet they have stumbled at the crucial moment: recognizing Jesus for who he is.

There is another category of people who also have experienced certain advantages. They are those who have been born and raised in the church. We know who they are. They are our sons and daughters. They are our brothers and sisters. They are our nieces and nephews. They received the sign and seal of the covenant. They were told the stories of the Bible, at home and at church. They went through Sunday School, catechism, young people's, and the like.

Compared to those who have no religious upbringing, they had all the advantages. Yet they have walked away from it all. At times, they are

merely indifferent to the faith; other times there is hardness in their attitude towards the church. They seem harder to reach than those who were not raised in the church.

How do we express our concern over this rejection? It is tempting to downplay the seriousness of this rejection. Perhaps we say to ourselves: Who am I to judge? Who really knows what is in their hearts? Perhaps deep down they do believe. Or perhaps the Lord will be merciful.

These thoughts express some good sentiments. But they can also be used as a cover, offering false hope. We need to take the issue seriously, because it is a matter of life and death; a matter of eternal life and eternal death. It is hard for me to put it in such stark terms. I too have siblings who have not stepped foot in church for years. I see that too many of my nieces and nephews have little place in their lives for God, Jesus and the church. I don't want to consider that some of them will not receive eternal life.

Yet if I am dismissive of this concern, if I down play it, will I have the passion that Paul has for the lost? We need to feel the pain and the anguish along with Paul. When we see anyone reject the message of Jesus, it should grief us. It should cause us sorrow.

The positive side is that this anguish should cause us to pray to God for the Spirit to break through the hardness of their soul. It should cause us to use the opportunities we have to bear witness to Jesus. It should cause us to have a passion for the lost. Paul's passion is very much evident here, as he is willing to be damned so that the damned might be saved. Can that kind of passion also be said of us?

A concern for the lost should be a real concern. It is a healthy concern. It is a necessary concern. But as we wrestle with this concern, let us do so in perspective of God's word, especially as Paul lays it out before us in these chapters, and let us keep in mind the bold assurance given in chapter eight. Nothing, not even the rejection of the gospel by others, will be able to separate us, the saved, from the love of God that is Christ Jesus our Lord.