

April 30, 2017

Romans 1:1-6 / Philippians 3:4b-11 / Romans 9:1-9

Anguishing Over Those Who Will Not Come to Christ

Today we begin the chapter I've been warning you about for weeks! And one of the reasons I've done that was because I was hoping you would read through the chapter ahead of time, so as to SOFTEN THE BLOW of hearing it for the first time from me, today and next week!

You see, chapter 9 is one of the deepest, most challenging, thought-provoking texts in the NT – and thus one of the least preached on chapters in the entire NT! In fact, I have NEVER heard any popular TV preacher ever preach on it. I've never even heard one allude to the central truth contained in it – ever! I have heard John Piper preach on it (in fact, he's the only one I've ever heard preach on it), but he's not a popular TV preacher.

And the same is true for popular Christian authors. They tend to avoid Rom. 9 as well. Like Max Lucado, who wrote the best-selling book, "In the Grip of Grace" which takes one through Rom. 1-8, conveniently ends before he ever touches on the truth of chapter 9.

And if you go by a purely marketing standpoint, it was probably a wise move. For if he had continued into chap. 9, and expounded it in the plain and ordinary sense, affirming the truth contained there – as Paul shares it – it may NOT have been a best-seller.

As I've mentioned before (and I learned it from personal experience) preaching or teaching on the content of chap. 9 in a way that affirms it (since not all pastors do) can have a disappointing effect in terms of attendance, whether it be a worship service or a Bible Study.

For when I preached through it in Honduras, as I've told you, four families stopped coming to church.

It's that hard for some people to come to grips with the truth Paul shares.

In fact, one particular man (from down south), when we covered this chapter in a Bible Study, finally blurted out in utter frustration: *“That may be what it says, but I don’t think that’s what it means. And anyway, my Bible says I can interpret it any way I want.”*

Folks, let me assure you the Bible nowhere says that! Because the purpose of reading and studying and memorizing Scripture (or hiding it in your heart) is *NOT* so we can go ahead and continue believing whatever we feel like believing anyway!

It's to let the authoritative Word of God change our thinking and the way we believe so that it fits or conforms to what the Bible teaches. To say that God gave us His words in the Bible, so we could choose to ignore them / or go on believing whatever we want in spite of them – is contrary to everything the Scriptures say about Scripture!

Yet here, I do have to ADD that I HAVE HAD OTHERS express their earnest appreciation to me for taking them through these verses. One man wrote me a note (which I still have) saying: *“I would like a copy of this series (of messages) on election... I cannot convey to you how much this series has helped me. How many questions it has answered, and the weight it has lifted from my shoulder.”*

Likewise, I had one other experience where the unbelieving mother of a lady from England visited her daughter and came with her to Bible Study – on the night we started Romans 9! And given the reactions I'd received in the past from Christians, I thought: *“Oh no, what a night for her to come. The night the text covers election, or God choosing certain people and rejecting others.”* She was 78.

And the reason I was concerned, was because the truth of election – of all biblical truths – usually sets people on edge. And especially those people who think, or were taught, our salvation is all about us choosing God, instead of God choosing us!

So, when I got a call that next day, with her daughter asking me if I could come talk to her “mum” because “she had something she wanted to tell me,” I was wasn’t quite sure what to expect.

But as I sat with her on their back porch overlooking the city of Tegucigalpa, she proceeded to tell me that she had grown up going to church all her life in England – but it wasn’t until the previous night, when I explained Romans 9, that she finally (after all her many years) understood the Gospel.

“I never understood it,” she said, “until last night, and all of a sudden it all made sense.” Two months later (though terrified of water), she found the courage to go into a pool for the very first time, and was baptized – by full immersion – along with her daughter, and her daughters husband and their two teenage sons!

When I spoke of the “missing puzzle piece” of God’s electing grace, the Spirit illuminated her mind and she came to believe. It taught me I should never try to outguess God! I would never have suggested an unbeliever come (as their introductory lesson on Christianity) to a study on election! I would have chosen something a bit more user friendly or seeker friendly, like chapter 8!

God (on the other hand) knew exactly what she needed to hear, and what He would use to bring her to faith. His timing in bringing her there on that particular night, when we were covering that particular topic, was exquisite! It was – in the providence of God – perfectly planned and perfectly timed.

So I tell you ahead of time: Depending on who you are, you will probably have one of two responses. You will either love or hate it, be completely unsettled by it, or experience great inner peace as you come to understand it.

I simply ask you to bear in mind it IS what the Bible teaches, and not something I made up, pulled out of a hat, or arbitrarily chose to believe.

So, let's get started by looking into what Paul shares with us in these verses. And as we do, the FIRST thing we discover in vv. 1-3 is a truth that dispels a common myth.

For here we read that Paul wrestles in his heart with a "great sorrow and unceasing anguish," because so many of his Jewish brothers and sisters have not embraced Christ – their Messiah – by faith, and therefore stand apart from the saving grace of God.

It's a truth that dispels the common myth, or accusation, often leveled against those that believe (as Paul does) that God is sovereign over salvation.

Sovereign in the sense that it is He who fore-knows, chooses, predestines, calls, and justifies certain individuals – and not others. That's what sets many people off.

In fact, I've had people tell me they reject the truths of predestination and election because those who believe those things are less passionate about missions and evangelism. That somehow people who do believe those things don't agonize, or weep over the lost, or earnestly seek to bring people to Christ. (One young mother said that to me a few months back, not realizing I was one of those people – and I had to correct her.)

Yet Paul's testimony in these 3 verses, regarding the immense pain and agony in his heart regarding his fellow Jews, or fellow Israelites, who refused to see, that Jesus was the Christ, dispels that myth. For he obviously believed those things (as we saw in vv. 28-34 of chapter 8), yet constantly anguished over the fact. And not just here.

For in chap. 10, v. 1, he again writes: *“Brothers, my hearts’ desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they might be saved.”*

In fact, he is so zealous for them to be saved, that he can say in v. 3: “For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of (or in the place of) my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.”

He knows it’s not possible and therefore he says: “For I could wish...” or “I wish I could...” But he can’t. We don’t have the ability to give our salvation to someone who does not have it, and somehow take their damnation upon ourselves.

Why? Because it’s God who is sovereign over those matters and not us – as Paul will go on to point out in the rest of this chapter. It is God who saves and not us, for we lack the power to save the soul of anyone.

But don’t miss the point we need to see from his words: That if we understand God’s sovereignty in salvation correctly, as Paul did, it will **NOT IN ANY WAY** diminish our desire and zeal to see others come to Christ. It will NOT harden us to the task of missions or evangelism, but will leave our hearts bleeding for those who don’t know Jesus.

Whenever we see anyone (but especially those we love) in danger of perishing, it should cause our hearts to break, and even make us wish that we could trade places with them. That *WE* could be the one’s who were cursed and damned instead of them. That somehow – *if it could be so* – God would reject us and receive them instead.

Then **SECOND** we see from these verses that Paul sees his fellow Israelites who haven’t come to faith in Christ as LOST. In fact, that’s the second myth this passage dispels – that Jewish people are saved simply because they are Jews, or Israelites, or God’s chosen people.

Paul says, “no.” Nor are they saved simply because they were given, have, or possess the Law, the covenants, the temple worship and the promises.

In fact, when Paul says of them in v. 3, “For I could wish that I my-self were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers...,” he is SAYING THAT because that’s the state the Jewish people are in outside of faith in Christ. That’s why he wishes with all his heart that he could trade places with them.

It dispels the common misconception (held even in some parts of the church) that Jewish people do not have to come to Christ in faith to be saved. These verses alone are enough to show that’s not true. For why would anyone have “great sorrow and unceasing anguish in their heart” for a person or group of people that was saved whether they came to Christ or not.

If they were the saved anyway, what would there possibly be to create such an ongoing agony in a person’s heart? What would there be to make a him want to give up his own salvation, and be cursed, and cut off from Christ, in the place of those others?

And why would Paul go on to tell the believers in Rome: “*My hearts’ desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they might be saved,*” if they were already saved anyway, apart from faith in Jesus as the Christ?

You see, some people simply want to believe what they want to believe – regardless of what the Scriptures say. Which is why I need to stress once again that the purpose of the Scriptures is to tell us what is true and how things really are, that we might conform our believing to what they say, not try to make them say what we already believe, or want to believe.

Truth is something God expects us to submit to, NOT something He expects us to edit, alter, water down or change to be more in keeping

with what we would prefer. As some have hard to learn the hard way, reality is not something that adjusts to our preferences, it's something that forces us to adjust to it. And a major part of wisdom is simply learning that fact – time after time.

Then **THIRD**, from verses 4-5 we see that spiritual privileges do add up to spiritual advantages, but they don't guarantee salvation. The Jewish people had the DISTINCT ADVANTAGES of being God's chosen people, possessing the divine glory, being given God's Law, receiving the covenants, having the Temple to worship in, being given the promises, tracing their lineage back to the patriarchs, and even being the people through whom the Christ came to bless the earth – "Christ, who is God over all, forever praised, Amen." (And that is the best translation of the Greek).

They were entitled to all those things, yet as Paul will go on to show, the vast majority – having those very distinct advantages – still failed to lay hold of the salvation that was in Jesus. Because they were blinded to the fact that He was the embodiment of them all.

As Jesus Himself states in John 5:39: *"You diligently search the Scriptures because you think that by them you have eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."*

I could say the same about Christians. Just because Christian children are raised in Christian homes, and have their own Bibles, and have memorized verses and promises, and are heirs of the covenant, and sit under the preaching of the Word, and are prayed for, and attend church, and may even have gotten baptized – *does not mean they are saved.*

Those are advantages that are to no avail if they don't come to Jesus in faith for life. That's where so many people can be deceived. They mistake spiritual advantages for the life that can only come when we are joined to Jesus by a faith that surrenders everything to Him.

Not just doing spiritual, churchy or religious things, but actually belonging to Him. Being fully committed to Him. Surrendering all to Him. Holding nothing back from Him. Being a living sacrifice for Him. Resting, trusting, and abiding in Him.

Is that you? Or are you still content with those mere spiritual advantages, which are good, but don't bring life until we have Jesus who is the embodiment and fulfillment of them all!

Then **LAST**, Paul moves on in v. 6 to explain why it is that one can have all those spiritual advantages and still not be saved – which starts the part people struggle with.

Assuming that the people he's writing to will have reasoned by now that if God chose Israel, and gave them His word, and the covenants, and the promises and all the other privileges they were given – then how could they fail to come to faith in Jesus? Does that mean that God's word failed to do what it was sent forth to do?

If God chose Israel, and gave her all those things, how is it that the vast majority were (in Paul's day) lost? Cursed? And cut off from Christ, and salvation, by their unbelief?

Did God's word fail to do what it was supposed to do? Especially since the prophet Isaiah tells us in 55:10-11: *“As the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth; it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”*

But these people would say: *“It DIDN'T achieve the purpose for which it was sent. If it was sent forth to save Israel, and it only saved some, but not all, then doesn't that mean it failed? Or at least, it failed in the majority of cases?”*

And what's Paul response? Listen! This is one of the most pivotal verses in the whole Bible in terms of understanding how the word of God never fails to achieve the purpose for which it was sent, while at the same time it does not save all who hear it, read it, study it or listen to it proclaimed. In fact, vv. 7-24 of this chapter – which are the ones people struggle with so much – are nothing more than a continuation of Paul's answer to this objection.

So, how does Paul answer the objection that God's word has failed, in the sense that it didn't accomplish its intended purpose of bringing all the Jews to salvation through faith in Jesus?

And here, we find that he basically says it hasn't failed at all! And he says that because as he will go on to show from Scripture itself – it was never God's purpose to save every last individual Israelite.

His purpose WAS to save all "His people," or "Israel." But as he goes on to say in v. 6, "***Not all who are descended from ISRAEL are ISRAEL.***"

That is, "Within the larger group we call ethnic Israel there's a smaller group (a chosen remnant) we could call true Israel, or the true people of God, and it's that smaller group (which through the word and through the promises) God determined to save."

As goes on to show in vv. 7-13 – it isn't ALL Abraham's descend-ants He has pledged to save. It's those who trace their lineage through Isaac and not Ishmael (vv. 7-9). And further, it's not even all those who trace their lineage through Isaac! Because Esau could do that, and v. 13 (quoting part of Mal. 1:2-3) tells us that Esau (and all his descendants) were not included either (v. 13).

So, the word "Israel" DOES refer to "the people of God," yet this is the key: It only refers to a select number of people from within the whole, and NOT all in that group. NOT all the people within the geo-political nation

called Israel are true Israelites in the spiritual sense. NOT all are a part of the group within national Israel that God purposed to save through His word and His promises. NOT every one of the group of people we call Jews (who trace their ethnic lineage back through Jacob to Isaac and Abraham) are part of the chosen remnant God purposed to save from eternity past.

In MOST EVERY CASE (and you can find this throughout Scripture) God chose to save a remnant from within His people not every last one. That's Paul's answer, which he will expand on in vv. 10-16, where he speaks of divine election –giving us answers that many people struggle with, do not like, have in some cases angrily protested against, and refuse to accept.

You see, God's promise in Isaiah 55:10-11 IS true: God's word ALWAYS accomplishes the purpose for which it was sent! But for that to be true we must understand that it's purpose is not always to save. In some cases (as with Pharaoh) it was meant to harden.

Some hear God's Word and it softens their hearts, stirs their souls, and they find themselves wanting Jesus, and trusting in Jesus. But others hear the word and it only makes them scoff, and sneer, and all the more determined to sin, and reject Jesus. They hear it and their hearts become as hard as stone toward Jesus.

Yet in their case (as Paul will show), that's what it was intended to do. It is sent to save some, and harden others. And it's all (as Paul says in v. 11) according to God's purpose in election.

That's the only way one can understand how the promise of Isaiah 55:11 is true: That God's word **ALWAYS** accomplishes what He desires, and achieves the purpose for which He sent it.