

Sermon 95: Romans 9:1-3: Paul and the Problem of the Jews

OUTLINE

Paul's conscience

Paul's emotions

Paul's wish

INTRODUCTION

From the heights of Mount Everest to the depths of the Marianas trench, that is how dramatic a shift we experience as we move from the end of Romans chapter 8 to the beginning of chapter 9. The contrast couldn't be greater as we move from Paul's ecstatic utterances on the certainty of our hope and that we are more than conquerors and that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus to the lows of 'great sorrow,' 'unceasing anguish of heart' and the wish that Paul could be cut off from Christ for the sake of the Jews (9:2-3). Some have seen the tone of this section to be so different from what came before that they think that Paul inserted a previous sermon into his material here. No, this chapter and section 9-11 flows naturally in the letter and from the chapter we have just finished. Chapters 9-11 deal with the question of the unbelief of the Jews. This question is not alien to Paul's argument in Romans but necessary to it. Let us go over the first 8 chapters in a quick fly-by in order to see why this chapter comes where it does.

Paul who had never visited the Roman church had a great desire to visit them. However, because he was putting the unreached in Spain first he decided to write to the Romans instead. The purpose of his letter was firstly to outline what he would say if he were visiting in person; this accounts for the systematic nature of the book of Romans. Secondly, this letter is a sample of the message he preaches because he was seeking the Romans financial and prayer support for his mission in Spain. Thirdly, there were racial tensions in the church that needed addressing. You will remember that Rome at one point kicked out all of the Jews. This left the fledgling church to find its feet as a Gentile church, with the return of the Jews there would have been theological and racial clashes; this accounts for the Jew-Gentile undercurrent of the whole letter to the Romans.

Chapters 1-3 highlight why we need the Gospel because God's wrath is revealed against our sins. The book of Romans mentions the wrath of God 10 times and 3:19-20 conclude that all people are under it and unable to remove themselves from under it by any of their own works. 'Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.'

But it is not all bad news, there is good news, God provides the righteousness that we need apart from works of the law, a righteousness that we receive not by working for it but by receiving it through faith. 3:21-4:25 teach us that we are declared righteous, or justified

through faith and the example of Abraham from the OT proves that this has always been God's way of saving sinners.

Chapters 5-8 deal with the benefits of our salvation. Now that we are saved we are utterly saved. This raises the questions of our relationship to sin and the law and so Paul diverts for chapters 6-7 to answer these questions before returning to the issue of our assurance in chapter 8 and rallying every possible argument for why our salvation will result in glory and not condemnation. This climactic chapter begins with no condemnation and ends with no separation. The certainty of our salvation is grounded in the work of the Trinity on our behalf. This work began in eternity past with God fore-loving his elect and those who are elect will be glorified, God is powerful enough to make His perfect plan come to pass and so Paul ends on the fact of our inseparability from Christ, for God always makes His will come to pass.

This brings us to 9-11. Paul is pulling several strands of thought together here. Firstly, he is concerned to speak to the issue of God's election. He has just argued that those whom God sets His love upon in eternity past; it is they that will be called, justified and glorified. There is nothing that can separate them from Christ. Any thoughtful reader would think to themselves, 'but aren't the Jews chosen and elect, why then aren't the Jews saved?' If the certainty of our salvation is based upon the fact that God has chosen us and will glorify all whom He predestines, is this not undermined by the fact that the Jews were elect but are not saved? In other words the power of God to save those whom He wills to save is in question and needs answering. Why the Jews have not believed and the Gentiles have is a serious question. Secondly, the racial tensions that were evident in the early church seemed to be fraught with pride and anti-Semitism. Based on what Paul addresses in 11 and 14 we get a real sense that the Gentiles were entertaining a type of replacement theology, that the Gentiles had replaced the Jews as the people of God and that there was no place of the Jews in the church. Thirdly, Paul himself would have been viewed with suspicion and as a traitor to the Jews because of his message and ministry. These chapters act as defence against the slander against him personally which could hinder their supporting his ministry in Spain.

Each of these three chapters is dealing with the issue of the unbelief of the Jews. Each chapter opens with Paul identifying himself with the Jews. In chapter 9 (1-3) we see his deep anguish over their unbelief, in 10:1 we see his heart's desire and prayer that they may be saved, and in 11:1 he identifies himself as an example of God's continuing faithfulness to the Jews. Each chapter deals with a doctrinal issue related to Jewish unbelief. Chapter 9 puts forward the doctrine of election to show how God's word has not failed to save all those whom God wanted saved. Chapter 10 deals with the message of faith by which both Jews and Gentiles must be saved. And chapter 11 deals with the doctrine of the remnant and God's future plans for Israel. Let us sketch a more detailed overview of chapter 9 before we get into the detail of the first 3 verses.

In verses 1-3 Paul stresses 3 times that he is telling the truth that he is in unceasing sorrow and anguish and would if he could exchange his own salvation for the Jews. His distress is amplified by how many privileges they have v4-5 and yet they still do not believe. His sorrow and their unbelief do not mean that God is not strong enough to save His elect. The

most important verse in the chapter is verse 6, 'But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.' Jewish unbelief does not mean that God is weak and cannot save whom He wills, why? Paul introduces us to the doctrine of election, he uses the word 'Israel' in two different ways telling us that not all who are part of physical Israel are part of spiritual Israel. In other words, the Jews who have not believed have not believed because they are not part of spiritual Israel although they may be part of physical Israel. Paul then gives numerous examples to prove His case. Verses 7-9 show that Isaac and not Ishmael was elect. V10-13 give the examples of Jacob and Esau. It is made explicit in these verses that God chose Jacob and not Esau not on the basis of works but on the basis of His sovereign election. Paul anticipates that some people would say that this is unjust in v14 and asserts that God is sovereign and can have mercy on whom He pleases and harden whom He pleases 15-18. Then Paul anticipates the objection that this nullifies human freedom and accountability because if God has mercy on whom He pleases and hardens whom He pleases, isn't everyone merely doing what God wills them to do? Paul answers this objection reminding us that we are creatures and that God does not answer to us (20-22). Then through rhetorical questions reveals that God is displaying His glory through His sovereign mercy and wrath (v23-24). In every chapter Paul uses the OT to back up what he is saying so in v25-26 he quotes the OT to prove that Gentiles would be elected to salvation. And in v27-29 he quotes the OT to show that a remnant and not all Israel was God's electing purpose. Verses 30-33 elaborate on the rejection of the message and unbelief which introduces chapter 10 and its emphasis on faith through a message as the means of salvation for all.

There is a lot of deep doctrine ahead of us and Paul's primary goal is to defend the glory of God by showing that election is God's way of working to demonstrate His mercy and wrath. He wants to prove that the word of God has not failed, that the unbelief of the Jews is deliberate and not something out of God's control. Before we get to those doctrines Paul has much to teach us in the opening verses. Let us see what we can learn from Paul as he wears his heart on his sleeve.

Paul's conscience

V1, 'I am speaking the truth in Christ--I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit.' 3 times Paul protests that He is speaking the truth. Firstly by telling us He is speaking the truth in the presence of Christ, secondly by negatively stating that he is not lying, and then thirdly by a clear conscience free from any conviction by the Spirit. Why is he trying to get his hearers to believe him? Some might think that his unbelievable statement of wishing to swap his place with his unbelieving country men might need some buffering. However it is more likely that Paul has to prove that he is a friend of the Jews and not a hater of the Jews. Think for a moment about how his unbelieving country men would see him. He has abandoned his former role as a Pharisee, he calls himself the apostle to the Gentiles, he believes that the Messiah has come and died on an accursed tree and was murdered by Judaism's highest authorities and most trusted leaders, he tells Gentiles that to be a follower of the Jewish Messiah that they do not have to be circumcised and eat kosher food or observe the OT calendar, he speaks out against the current teaching

of the Jews on salvation teaching that we are saved by faith not faith and law keeping, and he is hunted by the Jews in every town he goes to having much slander spoken about him that he is antinomian and libertarian. Paul's sympathies to the Jews would be in question and he would be perceived as a traitor, so he protests his deep sorrow and concern and an earnest desire for their salvation.

What is illuminating for us in Paul's protestations is his use of his conscience. The conscience is a God given faculty that acts to guide us in moral issues. It is not an encyclopaedia that can teach us everything about maths, science, history and geography but is a God given instructor in right and wrong. Contrary to modern psychological theories we are born with an innate knowledge of right and wrong and do not merely learn morals from our culture. Being made in the image of God this is vital to our humanity. However on account of sin the conscience can be ignored, seared and misinformed. We are sinners who have a natural bent towards self-rule and we will ignore the right when we are pursuing pleasure or our own good. Over time we can sear our consciences and if God's wrath comes upon us, or if we commit the unforgivable sin there will be a total silencing of conscience where we will become what society calls psychopathic. Or we can be uninformed or misinformed concerning the truth that our consciences misfire and we experience a false guilt that God does not intend for us to feel.

Paul is modelling the glorious liberty that a Christian experiences in the area of conscience. When we become Christians and the Lord renews our hearts our consciences revive and we can feel more guilty for smaller things than we have ever felt in our lives. This is a most important time to get our heads around the Gospel that Christ is our righteousness not ourselves. We now have the truth of the word and can renew our minds and properly inform our consciences. All those superstitious or legalistic notions that are not God's laws for us we can experience liberty in. We see a lot of this in the NT especially with the Jews because they are bound by OT laws that no longer apply after Christ, their consciences needed informing that those laws fell away with the coming of Christ. Paul is modelling the experience of the Christian yielding to the team of the Spirit and his conscience having free reign to highlight nay sin for confession and repentance. As a believer you are called to purge all sin, to offer it no home, no excuses, no safety. We are not to allow our hearts to be a refuge for sin but are to throw open all the doors and windows and allow God's Spirit and our consciences free run of our hearts to find the vermin that need exterminating.

So let me ask you, how is your conscience this morning? When was the last time you listened to your conscience? Are you someone who argues without listening? Can you identify this friend's voice from all the other false voices in your head? Is your conscience informed or speaking to you in legalistic tones trying to incur false guilt? Is your conscience in league with the Spirit or the devil? Is your conscience beaten into silence? When was the last time you asked the Spirit to shine a light on any part of your life and you were willing to change whatever the Spirit by your conscience highlighted? Is there a teaching that you know to be true that you refuse to admit? Is there an apology that you need to give but pride will not budge? Is there a sin you need to confess and put away from you?

To live with your conscience bearing you witness in the Spirit is a painful joy, a costly freedom.

Paul's emotion

We want to look next at Paul's emotions. When we talk about emotion today I am automatically suspicious. We see through shows like Oprah Winfrey how easily emotion can be manipulated in support of error. We can all testify to emotions that betray us, that are hormone induced, or the product of mass hysteria, but here we have Paul speaking about emotions that the Spirit will vouch are true. He says in verse 2, 'that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.' Here Paul is describing what he calls a 'great' sorrow and it causes him 'unceasing anguish'. Paul is speaking about the fact that the Jews, the chosen people of God, his kinsmen according to the flesh, those who have been the apple of God's eye throughout all of the OT, these have not believed and it is breaking his heart.

Emotion is a very unreliable thing because you can feel something during the worship or the sermon but when the hype cools down there is nothing there. We can be full of tears and good intentions while the music is playing and the words are flowing but they are soon gone when the stimulants dry up. Paul's deep compassion for the Jews was not mere emotion but manifested in action. We see that although he was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles that he preached to the Jew first in every town. His love for his people went beyond an affection to a willingness to suffer for them. Because Paul was seen as apostate he could have renounced his membership in the synagogues and not need to submit to their disciplinary actions, but for the sake of keeping an open door for the gospel he submitted to synagogue discipline in order to keep a foot in the door, listen to what he says in 2 Cor. 11:24-25, 'Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea.' In order to continue to have an open door for ministry among the Jews he allowed them to whip him like Christ was whipped five time in his ministry and to be beaten. No Roman citizen needed to submit to that, but as a Jew he allowed himself to be mistreated because in his heart he had great sorrow and unceasing anguish for his people. This sorrow was amplified by how many benefits they had received and yet still they rejected the Messiah. The more he thought about their privileges and opportunities, the riches they had received, the more sorrowful he was and anxious to see them saved. We see this sorrow in Christ Himself when He too mourns over the privileged Jews and their rejection of God's strongest overtures, Luke 19:41-44, 'And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side 44 and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

We learn here about true emotion for the lost, that a few tears while sitting in a comfortable chair mean nothing; Paul shows us that our concern must manifest itself in sacrificial

service, in a willingness to embrace all their anger just so that we can be closer to them. How can we have this passion for others that drives us to a willing suffering? Ponder and think about their condition. Here in NZ we are not thinking about the privileges the nation has had like the Jews. However, there are many privileges that they have had which make their rejection of Christ sad and heart breaking. 100 years ago how many Maoris were in church on a Sunday? Most of them! 40 years ago NZ was one of the largest missions sending nations in the world being beaten only by America and the UK. Today the nation is at least 50% atheist, churches are being closed down and used as bed and breakfasts and art galleries. The Christian conscience of NZ has been replaced with a secular human one and many laws being passed today are Godless. Ponder the abortion rate, the amount of single mothers, the amount of domestic abuse, the increasing crime rate, the age of children as they engage in sex, drink and drugs. Ponder and weep and go and suffer that they might hear!

Paul's wish

Finally we look at Paul's wish in v3, '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.' It would be difficult for us to find words that are more passionate in their desire to see another saved. He is stating that he wishes he could exchange his salvation for the Jews. There are several observations we have to make. Firstly, notice the word 'wish' Paul is not saying that what he wants is possible. We know that we can only be saved through Christ alone, and that if you were to offer your life to save another you would damn yourself and them. Secondly, some have tried to soften these words by making Paul mean that he wishes that he was outside of the church so that the Jews could come in without hindrance. However, the words 'accursed and cut off from Christ' are quite clear. The word 'accursed' is the word anathema and refers to damnation, and being cut off from Christ is not merely cut off from the church but Christ Himself. Thirdly, we must not think that Paul's wish is one of suicidal despair. Some have read these words and thought that Paul is so beside himself with grief that he wants to die. Not at all! Fourthly, please notice that this man who believes in the doctrine of election that God will have mercy on whom He pleases and will harden whom He pleases (9:18) is not feeling this great sadness with any accusation against God. Fifthly, notice that one can believe in the doctrine of election and still have a real compassion for the lost. There is a form of Hypercalvinism that is cold hearted and unfeeling that is a cold intellectual abstraction that has no feeling for the lost, this is not Paul at all. I doubt you could find someone more committed to election and more feeling to the point of being willing to give his eternal salvation for others. Sixthly, notice that Paul who has been whipped, beaten, stoned, slandered, chased, mobbed and all other sorts of persecution is not bitter, unforgiving or resentful. God is his witness that he wants to see them saved, and if he could he would exchange his life for theirs.

We see this powerful selflessness not only in Paul but also in Moses. You remember in Exodus 32 while Moses was on the mountain receiving the 10 Commandments, Aaron made the people a golden calf. Moses sought their forgiveness in a way showing the same spirit here as Paul praying, 'But now, if you will forgive their sin---but if not, please blot me out of

your book that you have written." Moses asked God to blot his name from God's book hoping this would persuade God.

However, the greatest act of selflessness was the act of Christ dying for us, and He really was cut off from God for our sins and for our salvation. He did experience the wrath of God that we might not and He did cry out, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' The same Spirit of Christ that was in Moses and Paul is in us and the love of Christ compels us to willingly lay down our lives for others. We do not have to trade our salvation for theirs, but instead knowing the fullness of the salvation that we have let us go in the joy of knowing eternal life and seeking others to know it too. There is a lot of deep doctrine in this chapter but let us not miss the greatest display of a sinner emulating Christ in His self-sacrifice and follow likewise.