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Great Sorrow and Unceasing Anguish

Romans 9:1-5

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This morning we'll be jumping back into our study of St. Paul's letter to the Romans. We finished looking at the first major section of the letter, Chapters 1-8, in November. Chapters 9-11 make up the next part. And these chapters aren't easy. Bp. Tom Wright has written that Romans 9-11 is as full of problems as a hedgehog is full of prickles. Many have given it up as a bad job, leaving Romans as a book with eight chapters of 'gospel' at the beginning, four of 'application' at the end, and three of puzzle in the middle.¹ Paul certainly never intended for Romans 9-11 to be a forest of prickles or an impossible jigsaw puzzle and I don't think it was at all difficult for the people in Rome who received this letter to understand what Paul was getting at—difficult, maybe, to accept or to practise, but not at all difficult to understand.

We've made it difficult. Not you and I, necessarily, but the Church in general. In Romans 9-11 Paul addresses the place of Israel in God's covenant plans. Again, remember the historical context in which Paul was writing. Romans, in general, didn't particularly like Jews. Some kind of dispute had broken out in Rome amongst the Jews or, possibly, between the Jews and Christians. It may have spilled over into open rioting. The Emperor Claudius responded by expelling Jews from the city. It was very easy for Gentile

Christians to start thinking that this was some kind of divine punishment. It was easy to think that God was done with the Jews. It was very easy to sneer at unbelieving Jews. Paul wrote this part of his letter to address this specific issue. It's one of the themes that runs through the whole letter, but here it's explicit.

As much as Paul tried to head off this sort of thinking that dismissed or even demonised the Jews, it continued to take root in the early Church. One of the first major heresies that cropped up, about a century later, was that of Marcion, who began teaching in Rome in the middle of the Second Century. He wrote off the god of the Old Testament as an evil and vengeful god only concerned with the Jews. Marcion taught that Jesus came to offer a better way of love and grace open to all peoples. Marcion became very popular for a time. Paul, as he was writing Romans, may have seen that something like this was very likely to be around the corner.

Marcion was condemned as a heretic and his ideas were put down by men like Irenaeus and Justin Martyr. But that didn't stop the Church from slowly absorbing a softer form of some of Marcion's ideas and falling into just the sort of error that Paul feared. In large part, this was because, as the Church became increasingly Gentile and the percentage of Jewish believers shrank, the gospel was unhitched from the story of Israel. The significance of everything that had come before Jesus in the Old Testament became less and less important. No one threw it away the way Marcion wanted to, but whereas theology for the Jews, for the first Christians, and for Paul was rooted in history—and especially in a particular story about a particular people—the Church Fathers, who were schooled in Greek and Roman philosophy, started rethinking theology mainly in terms of abstract and universal truths. For the Jews, for example, to speak of the righteousness of God was to speak of his covenant faithfulness. He had

called Israel into covenant with himself and had made promises to her and his fulfilment of those promises revealed his righteousness. Paul saw Jesus, Israel's Messiah, as *the* great witness to the righteousness of God. But that began to change as Christians started thinking more like Greeks. To speak of God's righteousness shifted and began to focus on God's character: his holiness, his uprightness, his goodness. They weren't wrong, but in the Western Church, it prompted Christians to start looking for the right answers to the wrong questions. We started thinking, for example, of salvation—more specifically about *justification*, the meaning of which also underwent a shift—in terms of unrighteous sinners receiving God's righteousness through the sacrificial death of Jesus. The dispute over exactly how this happens exploded in the Protestant Reformation, with Romans claiming that Jesus' righteousness is infused into believers and Protestants insisting that it is imputed. Now, if we're going to look at righteousness as something Jesus has and that we sinners need, this is an important question to ask. But that's not how Paul and the first Christians understood God's righteousness. God's righteousness was very much rooted in the story of Israel, because that's where his covenant faithfulness—his righteousness—is revealed.

As this shift happened, Israel's story was still there. The language was still there. But there was a disconnect. Think of the great Advent hymn in which we sing of Jesus as "Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art". Israel's story is there, and yet most Christians would be hard-pressed to explain how *Israel's* strength and consolation becomes the hope of *all the earth*. Most Christians would be hard-pressed to explain why it's significant that this Jesus who rules in our Gentile hearts was "born *thy* people to deliver"—"thy people" meaning Israel. This is why Romans 9-11 is so full of prickles, as Wright puts it.

¹ *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 1991), p. 231.

The other thing that makes it difficult to read these three chapters is our own history. The more the Church unhitched itself from Israel's story, the more anti-semitic it became. Not everyone was guilty. It was worse in some times and some places than in others, but it was there nevertheless. And, of course, it came to a head seventy years ago in the Holocaust. Even if we have no connection with Nazism, as Christians we know that our collective hands are not entirely clean. The Church, in some measure, contributed to this great evil. And now it's awkward to know how to address the question of Israel. The Jews have been through enough, we don't want to heap anything else on them and we feel guilty saying anything negative about them. On the liberal side, this has been dealt with by simply affirming that all paths lead to God. If that's what you believe, then what Paul has to say here doesn't really matter. On the evangelical side, we've responded in a variety of ways, but much of it has become mixed up with the modern theological system known as Dispensationalism that has muddied the waters and caused a great deal of confusion.

What Paul says here really does makes perfect sense—and it also makes sense that he raises this subject at this point in his letter—when we remember what he's been talking about and when we remember the key theme of the whole letter to the Romans. As I said back at the beginning of our study, Paul's key theme in this letter is that the gospel of Jesus reveals the righteousness of God. The good news of Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the great demonstration of the covenant faithfulness of the God of Israel. Paul's been working through Chapters 1-8 to show us precisely this. And now that raises two huge and glaring questions: If Jesus reveals God's righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, where does Israel now stand in God's plan? Second, seeing

that Israel largely rejected Jesus as the Messiah and was heading for judgement, what does that say of God's covenant faithfulness? Paul's answer, of course, will be that here we see the righteousness—the faithfulness of God—in all its glory. Bp. Krister Stendahl, in light of that, goes so far as to argue that this here is the heart and climax of Romans.²

Paul responds with a masterful, carefully worded, and carefully constructed argument that takes the shape of a psalm or of a prophetic oracle like the ones we see in the Old Testament. It begins with lament, it ends in praise, and right in the middle is prayer. In fact, right at the centre of it—the key theme—is Paul's pronouncement in 10:9:

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Paul certainly made this same argument many times as he travelled and preached to his fellow Jews in their synagogues. More than once he was thrown out into the street for making it. More than once he was stoned for it. This time, however, he's preaching to a mostly Gentile audience.

He begins in 9:1-2 with an anguished lament:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.

As if there isn't enough right here, it helps us to get a sense of Paul's grief to remember that he finished Chapter 8 excitedly and with great joy. Jesus, Israel's Messiah, has accomplished his

work. God's love and faithfulness have been revealed. In him we are more than conqueror. No thing and no one can stand against us. Ultimately, in Christ nothing can separate us from the love God. And now this. Paul knew that he was going to be fighting an uphill battle to persuade these Gentile believers that they needed to be concerned about the plight of Israel according to the flesh—unbelieving ethnic Jews. He gives a triple witness. This is the truth he's speaking in Christ. No, he's not lying—this is the truth. His conscience bears witness and not by itself. The Holy Spirit will not let him pass on this subject. And this subject gives him great sorrow—the Greek word here refers to a state of the heart resulting from some external concern—and it's caused unceasing anguish—the Greek word refers to the deep pain felt in the heart itself.

Now, notice that Paul hasn't yet told his readers the source of this sorrow and anguish. If they've been tracking with him this far, this sudden gush of lament and the intensity with which he expresses it should grab their attention. Whatever it is he's about to address, if it causes him this much agony, it's something they really need to take seriously too.

He goes on in verse 3:

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ...

To drive home the point even harder, Paul now says that he wishes he were cut off from Christ—from Jesus the Messiah. The word he uses for cut off is *anathema*. There's no more powerful way I can think of that Paul could have said this. If being anathema to Jesus would solve this problem that causes him so much sorrow and anguish, he would wish for it. Think about the fact that Paul has just spent several chapters detailing with joy the glories of what it means to be "in Christ". He knows as well as anyone that he can't undo this, but—

² *Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (London: SCM, 1977), page 4.

again—he’s trying to stress just how important this issue is to him. So what is it that causes him so much grief? Why does he wish that he were anathema to Christ? He goes on and writes:

...for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

For the sake of unbelieving Israel.

Think of one of those times when you’re travelling with friends or family in multiple cars. You’ve all agreed to meet up at a specific location. You took the lead because you’d been there before, but you told the other drivers where it was and, if you get separated, just watch the signs along the road. They’ll get you there. And off you go. Traffic is heavy. You get separated, but you get occasional glimpses of the other cars in the rear-view mirror. You take your turn off the highway and the destination is just ahead, but you look back with horror to see your friends continuing on, not following the signs. You pull out your cell phone and call, “Where are you going? You missed the turn.” And your friend responds that he’s got it figured out. You assure him that, no, he’s headed in the wrong direction. You try to persuade him. He gets angry and hangs up, leaving you all by yourself at the destination. Paul was dealing with a situation something like that, but it wasn’t anything as trivial as a dinner meet-up. Paul and his fellow Jews were all travelling along on what they thought was the road to the Messiah’s kingdom. Jesus the Messiah came and a few of them recognized him as the Messiah—as Paul had—and followed him, but—much to their sorrow and anguish—the vast majority of their fellow Jews took a different fork in the road—not the highway to the Messiah’s kingdom, but the highway to the judgement and destruction promised by the Messiah.

Paul travelled the Jewish world, preaching to his own people wherever he could, in synagogues and homes, and most of the people he preached to continued to reject the good news. The more urgent Paul was in his preaching, the more they rejected him—running him out of towns, having him arrested, even stoning him and leaving him for dead. And still he grieved for these people.

Paul calls to mind the story of Moses, as he descended from Mt. Sinai after forty days and nights with the Lord and having been given the law. We can only imagine Moses’ excitement as he went to share it with his people. But coming down from the mountain he found his people dancing like pagans around a golden calf. The next day Moses went back up the mountain to meet with the Lord. He feared for his people because of their sin and he pleaded with the Lord, “Alas, this people has 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” (Exodus 32:31-32). Paul feels just like Moses as he looks at his people and their rejection of the Messiah.

These are Paul’s brothers and kinsmen “according to the flesh”. That means they are also the Messiah’s people “according to the flesh”. Paul will address further what this means through Chapters 9 and 10 as he tells Israel’s story. Suffice it to say, being the Messiah’s people according to the flesh is their privilege. It’s also their tragedy. But, most importantly, it’s also their hope.

He continues in verses 4 and 5:

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is

the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

To the Israelites belong: adoption, glory, the covenants, the law, the worship, and the promises. But notice that these are the things that Paul has spent the last several chapters explaining *now* belong to and are privileges of those who are in Christ. Even the law, given to Israel, now belongs to those who are in Christ in the sense that the Spirit has put in our hearts a love for God that fulfils that law. The history of Israel, the law, the prophets—all of it—led straight to Jesus the Messiah and most of Israel had chosen to turn aside. But, speaking to these Christians in Rome, Paul drives home this point: What Jesus has given to you Gentile believers was first given to Israel. They have chosen to turn away from it all, but you who now make up the new Israel, who benefit from the blessings poured out by Israel’s God on his people—you who are Israel by the Spirit need to be concerned for those who are Israel according to the flesh. The Lord called ethnic Israel to be the light of the world and has now shone that light on the whole world while Israel has chosen to remain in the dark. God called Israel to be his messenger. The message has been delivered, but Israel—the messenger—has, herself, chosen not to heed it.

Even still there is hope. They who have all these privilege of covenant and law. They who are descended from the patriarchs chosen by God himself. They are the people from whom the Messiah has come. It can’t end like this. There has to be more. Remember that Paul’s overarching theme is that in the good news about Jesus the righteousness of God is revealed—his covenant faithfulness is shown and will be shown.

That’s as far as we’ll go today with this part of Romans. In closing I think there are two key points of application

we can take away. First, is the seriousness with which we should think of those who have not submitted to the lordship of Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, there is no hope for those who are not in Christ Jesus. We can speculate about people in far off lands who have never heard the gospel preached, but to whom God might somehow reveal himself in some saving way. It *could* happen, in theory. God is God, after all. And yet the Bible never really speaks of such things. What it does give us are passages like this—passages that stress the urgent need for unbelievers to hear the good news that Jesus is Lord and to repent, and to submit to his lordship in faith. What the Bible does give us are passages like this in which Paul does *not* express a hope that somehow, apart from hearing the gospel, his fellow Jews might somehow find a way to God, but in which he expresses sorrow and anguish that they've heard the message, they've seen all the signs on the road, but have chosen to turn reject the Messiah. Over and over Scripture stresses that if the people of this world are to know Jesus and his kingdom, his people—you and I—must proclaim it to them. Without the proclamation of the good news they are lost.

Second: the lost need our prayer in addition to our preaching. In his fellow Jews, Paul saw hardened hearts that could and would only be softened by the Holy Spirit. Paul saw the salvation as the sovereign work of God. And so he preached *and* he prayed. And not, in particular, that there is no arrogance in any of this. First—and Paul will elaborate on this in the following paragraphs—since election and salvation are the sovereign work of God, we can take no credit for them. We have no reason to feel superior because we have heard and believed. But also, to know the Messiah in whom God humbled himself and became incarnate for the sake of his people, to know the Messiah who gave his life as a

sacrifice for the sins of his people, produced in Paul a self-giving spirit in which he could wish—even though he knew such a thing to be impossible—he could wish to be cut off from the Messiah if it would mean that his people might know him. Conviction of the exclusivity of the gospel, Brothers and Sisters, never produces arrogance, but concern, sorrow, and grief for the unrepentant. And, Dear Friends, if our hearts are filled with such sorrow and grief for those who live apart from the love, the mercy, the grace, the life of Jesus' kingdom, then to preach to them the good news and to pray for the Spirit to soften their hearts should be as natural as breathing.

Let us pray: Merciful Father, as we live the new life you have given us in Jesus, cause us to remember and to think on all those around us who do not know your Son and who do not share in his life. Give us a concern and a burden for their salvation, not borne of arrogance, but borne out of love and mercy and humility that mirror your own. Move us to pray for them and move us to proclaim to them the good news that Jesus has died for our sin, has risen to bring life into the world, and that he is Creation's true Lord. Amen.