

“Down from the Mountain Top”

Romans 9:1-5

May 31st, 2020

One of the golfers on the pro tour some years ago was a pompous egomaniac with the emotional maturity of a six-year-old. He could do nothing wrong and always had a quick excuse for any loss: it was a bad course, the other golfers were cheating, or the weather was terrible. As if these faults weren't enough, he also looked to hustle a few extra dollars playing amateurs in cities on the tour for \$100 a hole.

One day he was approached by a man wearing dark glasses and carrying a white cane who offered to play him for \$500 a hole. "Why, I can't play you," the professional protested. "You're blind, aren't you?" "Yes, I am, but that's all right. I was a state champion before I went blind. I think I can beat you."

Now the conceited one had not been doing well lately--he needed the money. Anyway, blind or not, if the guy was crazy enough to challenge him...well, why not? "You did say \$500 a hole?"

The blind man nodded. "It's a deal. But don't say I didn't warn you--you'll lose your money. When would you like to play?" "Any night," replied the blind man. "Any night at all."

So, all of a sudden, the advantage goes to the blind golfer!

The last 10 Sunday mornings we've been in the lofty air of **Romans Chapter 8**. Our study of that chapter ended with last Sunday's sermon text, **Romans 8:35-39**, and it was the peak of the Romans Mountain! Paul's teaching throughout **Romans 8** kept us fixed on the assurance of salvation that is ours because Jesus lived, died, and rose again from the dead so we would enjoy eternity. God decreed it; He foreknew (meaning 'fore loved') us, and He predestined us to life eternal. Further, the chapter taught us, He called us, He justified us, and He glorified us!

Most, if not all of us, have enjoyed mountain top experiences. For many, it's going to summer camp or winter retreat. Those times typically end with some form of bonfire and an opportunity to write down on paper and repent of sins and renew one's zeal to live a Christian life by throwing the paper in the flames,

Summer camps, retreats, and conferences are always uplifting and spirit-building. But, the challenge is when we leave them and return home. If we just step back into the same life situation without also building accountability with others to help us keep the momentum of the mountain top experience from weakening, we get stuck in a rut.

The Apostle Paul knew something about a sudden shift from the joy and glory of **Romans 8** to the sorrow and grief of **Romans 9**. We see it in today's sermon text.

We're transitioning from **Romans Chapter 8** to **Romans Chapter 9**, looking at the first 5 verses. In fact, **Romans chapters 9-11** make up a unit; the material in those three chapters can be challenging, and difficult to understand. My aim is to lead us through these three chapters exploring the hard to swallow texts, as well as the implications of them for the Church. I'll say

this right off the bat - these are not popular chapters because few Christians read them, and few preachers preach them. They tend to “pull us along in directions we find it uncomfortable to travel.” (Boice, Vol. 3, xii)

Romans 9:1-5:

“I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, ² that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, ⁴ who are Israelites, to whom *pertain* the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service *of God*, and the promises; ⁵ of whom *are* the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ *came*, who is over all, *the* eternally blessed God. Amen.”

Verse 1 is Paul’s vow to his readers that what he’s about to declare in verses 2 and 3 can be believed absolutely. It’s his “cross my heart, hope to die” statement; his swearing that he will “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” *It’s a bit strange, isn’t it, that God’s apostle feels he has to tell the Church in Rome that he’s not lying?*

What Paul is stressing here is his emotion – his love - for his Jewish brethren. Another peak into Paul’s heart how he felt about Israel is **Romans 10:1** – “... my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.” Look again at verse 2, “I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart.” Paul is in anguish over his fellow Jews! *Why? Didn’t the biblical truths we discussed the last 2½ months in **Romans Chapter 8** pertain to them?* They should have, but they didn’t.

Paul realizes that of all peoples who should have grasped the gospel, it would be the Israelites. After all, they were God’s own special people throughout the Old Testament.

Consider what God says to Israel through Moses in **Deuteronomy 7:6-8**, “For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

We see here that God ‘chose’ the Israelites for Himself. He ‘set His love’ on them. God could have chosen any other people group or nation in all of the earth. But, He set aside the Israelites, and no others. Paul’s citizenship was with Israel. He had a heart for his Jewish brothers and sisters, so much so, that he would rather himself go to hell than any of them go to hell. That’s what he means when we read in verse 3, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh,”

Moses felt similarly for the cranky people God placed under his leadership. **Exodus Chapter 32** details the Israelite’s idolatry while Moses met with God on Mount Sinai (another of those ‘mountain top’ experiences!). In **Exodus 32**, we find the golden calf incident, where God’s people grew impatient with Moses, and in his absence, they wanted to worship God, so they

took matters into their own hands. They made a golden statue of a calf and stirred themselves into a frenzy of worship. There was a lot of “praise and worship,” but no biblical instruction!

Listen how **Exodus 32:30-32** reveals Moses’ heart for the Israelites: “Now it came to pass...that Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. So now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” ³¹ Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! ³² Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.”

Moses, like Paul, was willing to be condemned to hell on behalf of the Israelite people they so loved. The same can be said, in a much grander and glorious way, of Jesus’ as He arrived at Jerusalem His last week of earthly ministry. This is **Matthew 23:37**: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing!”

Let’s apply this to ourselves. *Do you have compassion for those in your life who are not presently Christians? Do you love them so much that you’d be willing to go to hell in their place so they could be in glory with the Lord? Are their people you know who are evidently not believers in Jesus Christ? Does your love for them reveal itself in “great sorrow and continual grief in your heart”? Look around you – you may not even have to look out of your home to find someone not walking with the Lord – a spouse, child, or parent who want little or nothing to do with us. It may be someone in your extended family, your work center, your schoolmates, your volunteer work, yes, even in your own church! How much do you love them? Will you go to hell for them?*

With verses 4 & 5, Paul gives us a list of the privileges/advantages the Israelites had that should have resulted in their eternal salvation.

- The adoption. Israel did not naturally belong in the heavenly family; God was gracious to admit them. (Morris, 348)
- The glory. This often is a visible symbol of the presence of God, also known as the *Shekinah* glory. Early in the biblical timeline, God was a pillar of cloud or a dark cloud, as He was when He gave the law to Moses at Sinai.
- The covenants. God’s covenant with His people was expressed through various agreements with our fathers in the faith. Abraham (Genesis 15), Moses (Exodus 24), and David (2 Samuel 23), for instance.
- The law. Came from God to Moses (that’s why Moses was atop Mount Sinai when the Israelites made the golden calf. We find the law expanded through the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), especially Exodus through Deuteronomy.
- Service of God. The Greek word for ‘service’ helps us to understand that this refers to the worship of God. The tent, tabernacle, and temple were the privilege of God’s chosen people, and all of them and their contents looked forward to the Messiah to come.
- Promises. The promises of God to Israel began as early as **Genesis Chapter 3**, where we learn in God’s providence that His plan would see two lines coming through Abraham. One line is the seed of the serpent (represented by Ishmael, Abraham’s son by Hagar, his wife’s handmaiden).

The other line is the Seed of the woman; beginning with Isaac (Abraham's son with his wife Sarah), from whose family would arrive God's Redeemer, our Messiah, Jesus Christ.

- The fathers (patriarchs). These are normally represented as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but could also include other early church fathers as Moses and David.
- Jesus according to the flesh (ancestry of Jesus). **Matthew Chapter 1** and **Luke Chapter 3** record the earthly ancestry of Jesus.

Despite these advantages, many Jews missed that they pointed to Jesus. Similarly, people today can be brought up in the Christian church and have benefited from its advantages, but miss the need to trust in Christ for life and faith.

- Having Christian parents like the Jews had patriarchs could lead you to putting your trust in their Christianity. It is a good thing to have Christian parents; especially if they pray with and for you, teach you God's Word, and bring you into the fellowship of the Church. But having Christian parents doesn't necessarily bring salvation to you. You must believe and be a follower of Jesus yourself.
- Having a Christian education isn't enough to save you from your sins; nobody was ever saved by head knowledge. Salvation is in the Lord; trust in Him, not in your learning.
- Resting in the fact that you hold membership in a Christian church is eternally harmful. People are admitted to the Church on the basis of a profession of saving faith in Jesus. If you are a Christian, and have the access to membership, joining the church is the right thing to do. Resting in Jesus, the Head of the Church is the way of eternal salvation.

Just as today's passage closes with reference to Jesus, so, an application of this text closes with Jesus. The opposite of sorrow and grief is joy and hope. God has included His children in participating in the great, worldwide building of His kingdom. Fellow Christian, we have the privilege and honor to share the saving message of the gospel with those yet outside the kingdom! Through that, God saves people to Himself and His Church! God will work through us to bring many to saving faith in Jesus as we testify to how Jesus has changed us!

I close with this parable of Jesus. It's often referred to as the "Parable of the Lost Sheep."

Luke 15:4-7: "So Jesus told them this story: "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. ⁶ When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!"