

## Romans 9:1-5

### *Great Sorrow*

**Main idea:** God would have us to have great sorrow over the lost for a time, and yet rejoice knowing that He truly is God over all.

I'm afraid that many people believe that the gospel is not really good news.

In talking with unbelievers over the years, I've learned that a lot of people reject the gospel because it just doesn't really sound like good news to them. When we share the gospel with them, what they hear is that they need to give up certain sins that they enjoy, or start living a certain way, or that many of their friends and family are still on the road to hell. That doesn't sound like good news to them. And yet I think that this might be because we often don't share the gospel in such a way to show HOW the gospel is good news.

In order for the gospel to truly be good news, it needs to be good news not just for a small group of people, or even for just a large group of people, but for all people. When Jesus was born, the angels declared, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."<sup>1</sup>

There are many mysteries in the Bible. What we believe about these mysteries often divides believers. There's the mystery of the Lord's Supper, and whether the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus, as Catholics believe, or whether the presence of Christ is in, with, and under the bread and wine as Lutherans believe, or if the bread and wine are merely symbols of Christ's body broken and blood shed, as we believe. And even though I think we're right about that, I have to admit that it's still somewhat of a mystery.

And then there's the mystery of God's sovereignty versus our free will. There's a huge division within Christianity about that mystery. It basically comes down to this: is God sovereign over our choices, or are we sovereign over our choices? In other words, can I choose something that God ultimately doesn't want for me, or does the very fact that I choose it mean that God in some sense did want it for me?

These are not simple questions. They're mysteries.

This morning, we're going to look at another great mystery. And if you listen closely to the word this morning, you may find that you've believed a gospel that is not good news enough. But I also hope that this morning you embrace the truth and mystery of the gospel as truly good news.

Romans 9:1-5. Please stand with me for the reading of God's word.

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. 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. 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. (Romans 9:1-5)

The word of God for the people of God. *Thanks be to God.*

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:10

Who does God love? Does God love everyone, or just some people?<sup>2</sup> Does God just love the Jews, or just love Christians? I think most Christians today would say that God loves everyone, but does God love some people more than others? And if so, who does God love more?

Does God love believers more than unbelievers? Most Christians seem to think the answer is yes. And in some ways, the answer is yes. If I have two children, and one of them eagerly obeys me, while the other curses me every chance they get, I will certainly delight in the one that loves me more. Psalm 147:11 says:

But the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love. (Psalm 147:11)

But I think that if we're going down this road of talking about God's comparative love, we also need to acknowledge that there's a sense in which God loves the unbeliever more.<sup>3</sup> If I have two children, and one of them curses me every chance they get, my heart will go out after that one. I will long for them to know that I love them. I will leave the ninety-nine in pursuit of the one.<sup>4</sup>

And I will even follow this child through hell and back in order to rescue them, that they might finally see that I love them. And, you see, God is love.<sup>5</sup>

And that's good news for all of us, because we've all sinned.<sup>6</sup>

I read a story about a little boy who was sent to his room because he had been bad. A short time later he came out and said to his mother, "I've been thinking about what I did and I said a prayer." "That's good," she said, "if you ask God to make you good, He will help you." To which the boy replied, "Oh, I didn't ask Him to help me be good. I asked Him to help you put up with me."

We've all sinned, but many people aren't yet ready to admit to God that they've sinned. And yet God still loves them.

I think that's exactly the spirit in which Paul wrote what we read this morning in Romans 9. A chapter later, in Romans 10, Paul stated that he often prayed for unbelieving Israel. Verse 1 says:

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. (Romans 10:1)

So, evidently, Paul believed that at least some Jews were not saved. They were God's chosen people, and yet a great number of them were not saved. And he desired that they would be saved. And this is God's desire for them as well. Paul wrote to Timothy that God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."<sup>7</sup>

So, I don't know about you, but I find this to be a great mystery. Paul says that he had great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart for unbelieving Israel. But have you ever wondered why?

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<sup>2</sup> John 3:16

<sup>3</sup> Romans 5:8, 2 Peter 3:9

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 18:12-14

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 4:8

<sup>6</sup> Romans 3:23

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 2:4

It's interesting how Paul begins talking about this. In Romans 9:1, he writes, "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit." And after a statement like that, we would expect to read some shocking and glorious truth about the gospel. Like, "I speak the truth in Christ: Jesus saves people from their sins!" Or, "I speak the truth in Christ: Jesus is the only way to the Father." But instead, we read a very personal disclosure about Paul's emotional state. "I speak the truth in Christ: I have great sorrow in my heart."

It's like Paul expected us to be shocked that he's sad. And actually, if you listen to a lot of prosperity preachers and even many popular evangelical preachers, you might get the impression Christians should never be sad.

You see, I think what makes Paul's statement so shocking is the fact that we all know that we ought to have GREAT JOY in our hearts because of Christ, not sorrow. I mean, when we preach the gospel, we talk about joy! We talk about peace. I've never heard anyone preach the gospel and then say, "So receive Jesus today, and you can have unceasing anguish in your heart! Who's in?"

But when it came to thinking about unbelieving Israel, Paul wrote that he had great sorrow. Do you have great sorrow for your unbelieving friends and family?

It's interesting that I've heard this same passage in Romans 9 used to talk about how we ought to have great sorrow for the lost people we know. And I think that's right. We should. Without Jesus, they're on the path to hell, just as we were.<sup>8</sup> But I want you to notice how differently Paul talked about the hope of the Jews versus how we often think about the hope of our unbelieving friends and family.

Follow along in verses 4 and 5. Talking about the Jews, Paul wrote that to them belongs the adoption. Not "maybe belong," but "belongs." It's theirs. To them belongs the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises, and the patriarchs. They all belong to the Jews. And Jesus even came from their family line to save them! So why should Paul have great sorrow? I mean, if anything, Paul ought to simply rejoice that he's also a Jew, and that Jesus came just as He promised, to save His people from their sins.

Paul wrote later in the book of Romans that the Jews are enemies in regards to the gospel, but that they're fellow heirs in regards to the promise given to the patriarchs.<sup>9</sup> How can that possibly be? I mean, if they reject the gospel, how can they be heirs of the promise?

And how could Paul wish that he were accursed and cut off for their sake according to verse 3? Some commentators say that Paul wasn't really saying what it sounds like he's saying, but I don't buy it. The straight-forward way to understand the Scripture is that Paul is saying that he wishes that he himself could descend to hell on behalf of the unbelieving Jews, and I think that's exactly what he was saying. How could Paul have that kind of love for them?

And how could Jesus have that kind of love for us? Now, there's certainly debate about whether Jesus descended to hell after He died on the cross, and what that looked like, and I didn't used to think that He did, but this is one of the things that Scripture has changed my mind about in recent years. It's clear in the Bible that Jesus didn't descend to hell for further punishment, because He said from the cross, "It is finished,"<sup>10</sup> but

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<sup>8</sup> John 3:18

<sup>9</sup> Romans 11:28

<sup>10</sup> John 19:30

I've become convinced that Jesus did descend to hell to declare the gospel of His victory over death and the grave.<sup>11</sup>

Now, I realize that what I just described is another mystery, and I'm fine with people having different views on it, but all I'm saying is that Jesus loves us that much: to die on a cross as a sacrifice for our sin,<sup>12</sup> and taking on Himself our punishment,<sup>13</sup> so that we can be set free from the curse of sin and hell.<sup>14</sup>

So, if Jesus loves us that much, and if Paul loves the Jews that much, and if we're to love our neighbors that much, how can we do that if we believe that most of them will suffer forever in hell? I mean, isn't that just too much to handle?

I've come to believe that we ought to have great sorrow over them. I think many of us have become so incredibly callous to the idea of great sorrow. And I think we've become that way out of self-preservation. I mean, if you really have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in your heart for the lost, it would be incredibly easy to lose all hope for them. To despair over them. To weep and gnash your teeth over those who are destined to go to a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

God used Abby to begin opening my eyes to this idea of great sorrow several years back. I fought against it for the longest time because of the hardness of my heart. But I've come to believe that God has a purpose for our sorrow: so that we would follow Christ in leading the captives free.<sup>15</sup>

You know, Jesus was called the Man of Sorrow.<sup>16</sup> And yet I believe that Jesus also had and has more joy than we can possibly fathom. Great sorrow, and yet even greater joy.

Look at the end of verse 5.

and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.  
(Romans 9:5b)

You see, God isn't just the God of the Jews, and He's not just the God of the Christians. He's the God over all. Jesus is Lord of all. And, in the end, He will be forever praised.

And if that's not extremely clear from Romans 9, it's actually all over the Bible. Paul wrote it again in chapter 14. It says:

For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." (Romans 14:11)

Psalms 66:4 says:

The whole earth will worship you and sing praise to you. They will sing praise to your name. (Psalm 66:4)

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Peter 3:18-20, 1 Peter 4:6

<sup>12</sup> Romans 5:8

<sup>13</sup> 1 Peter 2:24

<sup>14</sup> Galatians 3:13

<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 4:8

<sup>16</sup> Isaiah 53:3

Psalm 86:9:

All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.  
(Psalm 86:9)

And Revelation 5:13 says:

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (Revelation 5:13)

You see, Scripture is incredibly clear that in the end, God will be praised forever by all.

And this is another mystery. Some say that all will confess that God is King, even if it's against their free will. Like their knee will be forced to bow in submission to God, just as a convicted felon in prison has no choice but to admit that the king locked him up, even as he continues to curse and reject the king.

But to be honest, it's still a question and a mystery to me as to how all that will come about.

I've struggled through a lot of these kinds of questions, and I think the Bible answers them in ways that I don't always like, but in ways that show God's love, and wrath, and justice far more than we often even allude to.<sup>17</sup> But for now, I hope that you see at least this: that all of the Bible declares God's unconditional love toward all people, and that He has great sorrow over the unbeliever,<sup>18</sup> and great joy when the unbeliever comes to faith in Jesus.

And the gospel is effective in saving those who believe. Romans 1:16 says:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.  
(Romans 1:16)

Do you believe that? Do you believe that the gospel is powerful enough, good enough, to save sinners?

You see, what I've been describing to you this morning is the gospel, which is good news of great joy that shall be for all the people.

And while we might have great sorrow now, knowing that so many are lost, in the end, all our sorrow will be turned to joy,<sup>19</sup> and there will be no more pain, or sorrow, or death anymore, because Jesus will come and say, "Behold, I make all things new."<sup>20</sup>

Be made new this morning. Don't put it off. If I could, I would go through hell for you, but I can't. You may need to experience the wrath of God toward sin before finally seeing His perfect grace toward sinners.

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<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 55:8-9

<sup>18</sup> Ezekiel 18:23

<sup>19</sup> John 16:20

<sup>20</sup> Revelation 21:1-5

You see, some Christians believe God desires for all to be saved, but gives them free will. Some Christians believe God is absolutely sovereign, and all who He predestined to be saved will be saved. Some of you believe one of these. Some of you believe the other. I believe both.

I believe that God really is sovereign, and that He really does love everyone. And, believing both, I believe that God really wants to save you.

So my only question to you this morning is simple: will you let Him save you?

Receive Jesus now. He really is good.