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A BURDEN FOR THE LOST

Romans 9:1-5

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Romans Lesson 57

A Burden for the Lost Romans 9:1-5

I need to begin by letting you know that this is a difficult sermon for me to preach because I fall so far short of the example of Paul's deep burden for lost souls that we see here. I can't fathom *ever* making a statement like Paul makes here, that he would be willing to be eternally damned if it would result in the salvation of his countrymen, the Jews! C. H. Spurgeon (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 24:410-411) reported how John Bunyan said "that he often felt while preaching that he could give his own salvation for the salvation of his hearers." Then Spurgeon stuck the knife in: "And I pity the man who has not felt the same."

Well, Spurgeon would pity me! For many years I've had on my prayer list that God would give me a deeper burden for the lost. I pray often for lost people to come to salvation. I try to preach the gospel faithfully. But I don't understand how anyone could say what Paul says here. You hear about people giving up a kidney for someone who needs a donor, which is a noble sacrifice. *But giving up your eternal salvation!* To be honest, I'm just not there! So I've got a lot of room to grow! Maybe you do, too.

The mood of Romans shifts dramatically in chapter 9. Paul ends chapter 8 rejoicing in the glorious fact that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. But then he abruptly shifts gears, telling of his great sorrow and unceasing grief, even to the point of wishing that he could be separated from Christ, on account of the sad spiritual condition of the Jews. In spite of their great spiritual privileges, for the most part they were alienated from their Messiah.

This abrupt change of mood signals that we're moving into a new section of Romans that runs from chapter 9 through chapter 11. It's a difficult section in many ways. Some of it is difficult to understand and even if you understand it, some of it is difficult to accept. Romans 9 is one of the strongest statements on the sovereignty of God in the Bible, and many struggle with that doctrine. They don't like what it seems to imply with regard to human "free

will." And so they try to explain away Paul's strong statements in this chapter. Others get so carried away with God's sovereignty that they end up practically denying human responsibility. But the Bible is clear that sinners are responsible to repent and believe in Christ. But when they do repent and believe, it is totally due to God's sovereign grace, so that none may boast.

But it may surprise you to hear that God's sovereignty is *not* the main theme of Romans 9. Rather, Paul brings up that topic to support the main theme. Here's why Romans 9-11 is crucial to the argument of Romans and to your life: In Romans 8, Paul has given us the wonderful, reassuring truth that all whom God foreknew ("decided beforehand to enter into a relationship with") and predestined to salvation will be saved and glorified for all eternity, so that Jesus will have the preeminence. He ends the chapter with the strong assurance that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God.

But if you know anything about the Old Testament, that raises a huge problem. The Old Testament is clear that the Jews were God's chosen people (Deut. 7:6; 14:2). God promised to bless them and to bless all nations through them. But when Paul wrote Romans, most of the Jews were rejecting Jesus as their Messiah. And many of them were also persecuting those (like Paul) who claimed that Jesus was their Messiah.

So the problem is: In light of the Jews' rejection of Christ, has God's purpose to bless the Jews failed? And, if God's purpose for them failed, then how do we know that His purpose to save us will succeed? How do we know that *nothing* can separate us as His chosen people from His love in Christ, when in fact the Jews are separated from Christ? That question governs Romans 9-11.

Here's Paul's flow of thought: In 9:1-5, he affirms his heartfelt concern for the salvation of the Jews. He does so in part because many Jews accused Paul of abandoning his own people for the sake of the despised Gentiles. Paul affirms also the privileged spiritual position of the Jews.

But this raises the question (9:6), "Has the word of God then failed?" Paul's answer (9:6-13) is, "No, because God has always worked through a remnant according to His sovereign choice." He

chose Isaac, not Ishmael (9:6-9). Then He chose Jacob, not Esau (9:10-13). But this raises the question (9:14), "Is God then unfair?" Paul answers (9:15-18) by asserting God's sovereign right to show mercy to whom He desires and to harden whom He desires.

But this raises the further question (9:19), "If God is totally sovereign, then how can He find fault with anyone, because who can resist His will?" Paul answers by saying, in effect (9:20-24), "Who do you think you are to question the Sovereign of the universe, whose glorious purpose is far bigger than you imagine!" Then (9:25-29), he backs up what he has just said with Old Testament Scripture to show that he isn't making this up. He ends the chapter (9:30-33) by showing why Israel failed to receive the promise, while the Gentiles did receive it.

Next (10:1-4) he says that the Jews were zealous to establish their own righteousness, but they missed Christ, who "is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:4). Salvation is available to all who will believe (10:5-13). But in spite of God's invitation, Israel has largely rejected it, while many Gentiles have accepted it, as the Old Testament affirms (10:14-21).

Does this mean that God has permanently rejected the Jews (11:1)? No, just as God in the past worked through a remnant, so He is doing now (11:2-10). But, this is not the final picture, since God has promised a glorious future for Israel. Their present rejection of the gospel has opened the door to the Gentiles, to make Israel jealous (11:11-16). But the Gentiles need to be careful not to become proud. If God broke off Israel for their unbelief, He could do the same with the Gentiles (11:17-24). In fact, He will again show mercy to Israel, so that "all Israel will be saved" (11:25-32). Thinking about God's sovereign mercy over the course of history causes Paul to erupt in a final burst of praise for God's unfathomable wisdom (11:33-36).

With that as a preview, let's focus on 9:1-5, where Paul shows us his heart for the lost. The lesson is:

We should be burdened for the salvation of lost souls because the love of Christ and the love of God's truth impel us.

1. We should be burdened for the salvation of lost souls because the love of Christ impels us (9:1-3).

You may say, "I don't see any mention of the love of Christ in 9:1-3." But for three reasons I believe that this was behind Paul's burden for his lost kinsmen. First, he has just finished (8:35-39) extolling "the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." The gracious love that Paul had received while he was yet a sinner (5:8) impelled him to want his countrymen to experience that same love.

Second, in 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul tells us to imitate him just as he imitated Christ, and it was Christ's love that moved Him to lay down His life for His sheep (John 3:16; 10:11-15). Paul's *hypothetical* willingness to be damned if it meant the salvation of the Jews reflects Christ's *actual* willingness to bear the wrath of God so that His sheep would be saved.

Third, in 2 Corinthians 5:14, in an evangelistic context, Paul states, "For the love of Christ controls us..." Thus, Christ's love that reached down to us in our sin should impel us to reach out to other sinners with the good news that if they will trust in Christ, He will save them. Note four things:

- A. It is possible to have great sorrow over the lost at the same time that we have great joy in Christ.

Paul has just exuberantly told of God's great love for us in Christ, but now he tells of his "great sorrow and unceasing grief." He wasn't bi-polar, going from a super-high to a super-low! Rather, he was "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). It's possible to be both sorrowful and yet rejoicing at the same time. It's interesting that the shortest verse in the English New Testament is John 11:35, "Jesus wept." The shortest verse in the Greek New Testament is 1 Thessalonians 5:16, "Rejoice always."

If I focused on the sad condition of lost people to the extent that I had *only* great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart, I would be very depressed. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night. I wouldn't reflect the joy of the Lord. On the other hand, if I were so filled with the joy of my salvation that I *never* felt any sorrow or grief for the lost, I would be very self-centered and calloused. I need *both* the joy of salvation that moves me to want others to know the same joy, along with sorrow over the sad condition of the lost, so that I reach out to them with kindness and compassion.

- B. We should be especially burdened for the salvation of those with whom we share a natural affinity.

This is not to say that we should not cross social, cultural, linguistic, or national barriers to share the good news. How will such people hear unless someone goes to tell them (10:14-15)? After all, Paul the Pharisaical Jew was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. But it is to say that God has given us a natural affinity with some around us. Paul the Jew had a great burden for his fellow Jews. Cross that natural bridge to share the good news with your “kinsmen according to the flesh.”

Pastor Tom Mercer (*Oikos: Your World Delivered* [Professional Press], revised as *8 to 15: The World is Smaller Than You Think*; *oikos* is the Greek word for “household”) says that each of us has 8 to 15 people that God has placed in our relational world. Through us He wants to get the gospel to these people. Identify those 8-15 people in your life, begin to pray for them, and ask God for opportunities to show His love and grace to them either in deed or word.

But, maybe some of those 8 to 15 people have hurt you or treated you badly. What then?

- C. We should be burdened especially for the salvation of those who have hurt us the most.

Who persecuted Paul just about everywhere he went? The Jews! Who was Paul most burdened for? The Jews! I could understand if he had said, “Let them go to hell! They deserve it!” But instead, his heart’s desire and prayer for them was for their salvation (10:1).

I’m not saying that if you’ve been physically or sexually abused you should put yourself in a situation that would expose you to further abuse. That would be unwise. But I am saying that you should pray often for the salvation of those who hurt you. Maybe you won’t be the one to share the gospel with them, but you can pray that God will bring someone into their lives to lead them to Christ. And, if you do have contact, you can respond to any verbal abuse or meanness with the kindness and love of Christ.

- D. Lost people won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.

I didn't originate that phrase, but it captures a truth that oozes out of verse 3, where Paul says that he could wish himself accursed and separated from Christ for the sake of his fellow Jews. That is such a radical statement that Paul felt the need to say (9:1), "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit" Some of his Jewish enemies thought that Paul had forsaken his Jewish heritage for the sake of the despised Gentiles. But before God, Paul testifies that he had such deep concern for the Jews that he would be willing to give up his salvation if it meant that they could be saved!

As I said, I can't imagine saying such a thing! How should we understand it? Without going into various interpretations, I think that Paul is speaking hypothetically. He has just said that it's impossible for anything to separate us from God's love. But here he's trying to convey how deeply he was burdened for the salvation of the Jews. C. E. B. Cranfield (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [T & T Clark International], pp. 456-457) translates, "For I would pray (were it permissible for me so to pray and if the fulfillment of such a prayer could benefit them)...." Paul knew that such a prayer was not permissible and would not result in the salvation of the Jews. But he's showing us how much he cared about the salvation of his lost kinsmen, the Jews.

It's hard to square Paul's compassion for *all* the Jews with Exodus 33:19, which he cites in 9:15, where God tells Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." That statement implies that God does *not* have compassion on everyone, as the subsequent plagues on the Egyptians showed. But the difference is, God is God and we're not God! He is free to show mercy to some and to harden others (9:18). But we need to show compassion to all, knowing that God will use the display of His love through us to save those who believe and to judge those who refuse to believe.

So pray that the love of Christ will control you to such an extent that you show His love even to those who mistreat you, who deserve His judgment. Ask Him to give you a burden for the lost. But, we need to focus briefly on 9:4-5:

2. We should be burdened for the salvation of lost souls because the love of God's truth impels us (9:4-5).

Again, you may wonder, "Where do you see the love of God's truth in these verses?" To give due credit, I got this insight from Douglas Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 560). Paul desperately wanted to see the Jews saved not only because of his love for them, but also because he loved the truth of God's promises to them. He didn't want people to think that the word of God had failed (9:6). Three observations:

- A. Our primary motive for seeing lost souls saved should be God's glory.

Even beyond Paul's compassion for his fellow Jews was his zeal for God's glory, which is the driving force of chapters 9-11. These chapters are a defense of God's word and His glory against a serious problem that seemingly could undermine His ability to fulfill His promises, namely, the widespread unbelief of the Jews. God's main purpose for creating the world was not to save souls, but to display His infinite glory. That should be our motive as we bear witness of Christ.

- B. We should be especially burdened for the salvation of those who enjoy the greatest spiritual privileges.

The Jews had unique spiritual privileges, but they were lost. Great spiritual privileges will not save anyone unless they respond to these privileges. The Jews' rejection of Christ shows that salvation is not just a matter of considering the evidence and making a rational decision to choose God. The fallen human heart is spiritually dead (Rom. 3:10-18; 8:6-8). The difficulty with many lost people is that they trust in their religious privileges, not in the Savior. What a tragedy to be religiously zealous, but lost! Salvation is not a matter of spiritual privilege alone, but rather of God's sovereign grace that imparts life to dead sinners.

Paul lists nine spiritual privileges that God gave to the Jews. First, they were *Israelites*. The name focuses on the descendants of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel. Moo (p. 561) says that it "suggests a people chosen by God to belong to him in a special way and to be the vessels of his plan of salvation for the world."

Second, they had *the adoption as sons* (Exod. 4:22; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1). This does not mean that all Jews were saved; rather, it refers to God's adoption of the nation.

Third, they had *the glory*. This refers to God's glory being displayed in their midst on numerous occasions (Exod. 16:10; 40:34; 1 Kings 8:10-11). What an amazing privilege!

Fourth, they had *the covenants* that God made with Abraham, Moses, David, plus, perhaps, the New Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; Exod.24:7-8; Ps. 89:3-4; Jer. 31:31-37; Eph. 2:12). God did not enter into such covenants with any other nation.

Fifth, they received *the law* (Exod. 20:1-17), which told them how to live in a manner pleasing to God.

Sixth, they received God's pattern of *temple service*. God revealed the various feasts and sacrifices that Israel was to observe.

Seventh, they received God's *promises*, which covers all of God's covenant blessings.

Eighth, they were descended from *the fathers* of the Jewish faith, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Finally, they were the race that brought *the Christ* according to the flesh into the world.

This applies to you if you were raised in a Christian home and grew up in the church. Do you realize how privileged you are? There are billions of people in this world who are "separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). But your great spiritual privileges will become great spiritual liabilities that will testify against you at the judgment if you do not repent of your sins and trust in Christ.

There is also an application for those of us who have responded to God's grace: Don't assume that just because someone you know is a lifelong church member or grew up in a Christian home that he is saved. As great a privilege as it is to be exposed to these truths, each person must repent and believe for these privileges to become blessings. Make sure that your family or friends who grew up in the church *truly* know Christ as Savior and Lord.

- C. The salvation of lost people requires that they come to know Jesus Christ as God in human flesh.

Paul ends verse 5, "the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen." There is debate over how to translate and punctuate that verse, because the original Greek did not have punctuation. Some argue that because it is uncharacteristic of Paul directly to call Christ "God," the last phrase must be a separate benediction referring to God the Father.

But there are solid grammatical, logical, and biblical reasons to accept this as a direct statement of Christ's deity. It balances the affirmation of His humanity in the preceding phrase. The Greek word order favors it. A joyful doxology seems out of place here and would be an abrupt change of subject. The early Fathers, whose native language was Greek, understood it this way. And, there are other texts where Paul clearly refers to Jesus as God (Phil. 2:9-11; Eph. 1:20-22; Col. 2:9; 2 Thess. 1:12; Titus 1:3-4; 2:13; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 350).

The gospel is not, "Believe in Jesus however you may conceive Him to be." Rather, it is, "Believe in the Lord Jesus revealed in Scripture, who is eternal God in human flesh, who offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins, who was raised bodily from the dead." The Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses claim to believe in Jesus, but their "Jesus" is not the eternal Son of God. Salvation depends on believing in Jesus as Lord, which means, "God."

Conclusion

Are you burdened for the salvation of lost souls? If you're anything like me, you have to answer honestly, "Not as much as I should be." Frankly, I may never be burdened to the degree that Paul was, where I would be willing to forfeit my salvation if it meant the salvation of lost souls.

But ask God to give you a burden for the lost. Pray for the lost, especially those you have frequent contact with. When God gives the opportunity, share the gospel with the lost. Pray for missionaries and give so that they can take the gospel to those who have never heard about Christ. And, perhaps some of you will sense that God is calling you to cross cultural and linguistic barriers to take the gospel to the lost. The love of Christ and the love of God's truth should impel us to have a burden for lost souls.

Application Questions

1. Do you give much thought or prayer to the horrible situation of lost people? How can you change this?
2. Think about 8-15 people that you have a natural affinity with. Write down their names and begin to pray for their salvation.
3. How practically can we show lost people that we genuinely care about their spiritual condition, especially when they don't seem the least bit concerned?
4. Is it necessary for a person to understand and believe that Jesus is God in order to be saved, or can this come later? Can a truly saved person deny the deity of Jesus?

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