

## ***The Great Tragedy***

Romans 9

January 28, 2018

*With Christ as my witness, I speak with utter truthfulness. My conscience and the Holy Spirit confirm it. <sup>2</sup> My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief<sup>3</sup> for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them. <sup>4</sup> They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God’s adopted children. God revealed his glory to them. He made covenants with them and gave them his law. He gave them the privilege of worshiping him and receiving his wonderful promises. <sup>5</sup> Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are their ancestors, and Christ himself was an Israelite as far as his human nature is concerned. And he is God, the one who rules over everything and is worthy of eternal praise! Amen.*

*<sup>6</sup> Well then, has God failed to fulfill his promise to Israel? No, for not all who are born into the nation of Israel are truly members of God’s people! <sup>7</sup> Being descendants of Abraham doesn’t make them truly Abraham’s children. For the Scriptures say, “Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted,” though Abraham had other children, too. <sup>8</sup> This means that Abraham’s physical descendants are not necessarily children of God. Only the children of the promise are considered to be Abraham’s children. <sup>9</sup> For God had promised, “I will return about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”*

*<sup>10</sup> This son was our ancestor Isaac. When he married Rebekah, she gave birth to twins. <sup>11</sup> But before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad, she received a message from God. (This message shows that God chooses people according to his own purposes; <sup>12</sup> he calls people, but not according to their good or bad works.) She was told, “Your older son will serve your younger son.” <sup>13</sup> In the words of the Scriptures, “I loved Jacob, but I rejected Esau.”*

*<sup>14</sup> Are we saying, then, that God was unfair? Of course not! <sup>15</sup> For God said to Moses, “I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose.”*

*<sup>16</sup> So it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it. <sup>17</sup> For the Scriptures say that God told Pharaoh, “I have appointed you for the very purpose of displaying my power in you and to spread my fame throughout the earth.” <sup>18</sup> So you see, God chooses to show mercy to some, and he chooses to harden the hearts of others so they refuse to listen. <sup>19</sup> Well then, you might say, “Why does God blame people for not responding? Haven’t they simply done what he makes them do?”*

*<sup>20</sup> No, don’t say that. Who are you, a mere human being, to argue with God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, “Why have you made me like this?” <sup>21</sup> When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn’t he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into? <sup>22</sup> In the same way, even though God has the right to show his anger and his power, he is very patient with those on whom his anger falls, who are destined for destruction. <sup>23</sup> He does this to make the riches of his glory shine even brighter on those to whom he shows mercy, who were prepared in advance for glory. <sup>24</sup> And we are among those whom he selected, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles.*

*<sup>25</sup> Concerning the Gentiles, God says in the prophecy of Hosea, “Those who were not my people, will now call my people. And I will love those whom I did not love before.” <sup>26</sup> And, “Then, at the place where they were told, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘children of the living God.’”*

<sup>27</sup> And concerning Israel, Isaiah the prophet cried out, “Though the people of Israel are as numerous as the sand of the seashore, only a remnant will be saved. <sup>28</sup> For the LORD will carry out his sentence upon the earth quickly and with finality.” <sup>29</sup> And Isaiah said the same thing in another place: “If the LORD of Heaven’s Armies had not spared a few of our children, we would have been wiped out like Sodom, destroyed like Gomorrah.”

<sup>30</sup> What does all this mean? Even though the Gentiles were not trying to follow God’s standards, they were made right with God. And it was by faith that this took place. <sup>31</sup> But the people of Israel, who tried so hard to get right with God by keeping the law, never succeeded. <sup>32</sup> Why not? Because they were trying to get right with God by keeping the law instead of by trusting in him. They stumbled over the great rock in their path. <sup>33</sup> God warned them of this in the Scriptures when he said, “I am placing a stone in Jerusalem that makes people stumble, a rock that makes them fall. But anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.”

Romans 9:1-33 (NLT)

Romans chapter 9 marks a transition in Paul’s letter to the early Christians in Rome. It’s like his letter is divided up into three sections, Romans chapters 1-8 is about Christian doctrine, Romans chapters 12-16 is about living out that doctrine, living out our Christian faith, and sandwiched between those two major sections is Romans chapters 9-11. Some have even believed over the years that chapters 9-11 were just dropped in with no connection to the other two parts, or at best loosely connected. But most scholars now believe that is not the case and that they are an important part of Paul’s letter, tied tightly with the other two parts.

Beginning with Romans chapter 9, the three chapters, 9-11, focus on the place of Israel in God’s great plan of redemption: 1) from early on when he chose Abraham to be the father of the Jewish people; 2) at the time when Paul wrote this letter when most of the early Christians were Jewish; and 3) even up until today.

Paul tries to address one of the most troubling and perplexing problems that the Christian Church over the centuries has tried to solve, where do the Jewish people, the Israelites fit into God’s plan of redemption today? And over the years, a lot of people, a lot smarter than most of us, have studied it intently and have come to different conclusions. So to think that we are all going to be able to come to the right conclusion over the course of the next three weeks as we look at these three chapters, is rather preposterous, meaning silly and contrary to common sense or reason. And ultimately it is not our perplexing question to decide. Where the Israelites and/or the Jewish people fit today in God’s plan for redemption is ultimately up to God. To quote God from the prophet Moses, used quite appropriately in our passage this morning from Paul, “*I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose.*” First and foremost we need to remember that God is God, and we are not, and we will never fully know and understand Him, especially during our time here on earth!

The first thing we need to notice to put this part of Paul’s letter in perspective is the personal pain that he is experiencing writing this part: *My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters.* We need to remember that Paul himself was a Jew. This is his own people whom he is writing about. He has deep love and concern for them. In fact so much so that he would rather himself be “forever cursed – cut off from Christ” if that would save his Jewish brother and sisters who are lost because of their lack of faith in Jesus

Christ. It is pretty much the same plea that Moses made to God when he came down off the mountain and discovered that his people had built the idol of the golden calf; “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (Exodus 32:31-32). After Paul’s conversion experience he has the same heart as God. He desires that no one be lost, Gentile or Jew. Paul would have willingly laid down his own life if he could have won the Jews, his own people, for Christ.

Paul begins this part of the letter, the first five verses of chapter 9, by telling of all the benefits the Jewish people had received from God over the years:

1. The Israelites were originally chosen to be God’s adopted children (v.4) -

Paul ended our section last week with Romans chapter 8 telling us how Christians now become God’s adopted children through faith in Jesus Christ. God extended the invitation to the Jewish people to become his adopted children long before Jesus was even born. The sad truth is that throughout the centuries most of Israel has refused to accept that – both before Jesus was born and since.

2. God revealed His glory to the Israelites (v.4) –

Throughout the years God had revealed his glory to the Israelites many times, referred to in the Bible as “shekinah” – which was the divine splendor of light which descended when God was visiting his people. But most of Israel failed to see it. They looked the other way. To us today the glory of God has been revealed through God’s love and mercy in the face of Jesus Christ.

3. God made covenants with the Israelites –

A covenant being a relationship entered into by two parties in which both sides agree to fulfill their side of the agreement, for mutual benefit. God did not just enter into one covenant with the Israel people, He approached them again and again.

Irenaeus (approx. 120-200 A.D.), one of the early church father’s and one of its earliest theologians, distinguishes four great occasions when God entered into covenant with men and women:

- a. 1<sup>st</sup> was the covenant with Noah after the flood, and the sign was the rainbow in the heavens which stood for God’s promise that He would never again remove the people from the face of the earth because of their great evil, in one big swipe like the great flood.
- b. The 2<sup>nd</sup> was the covenant with Abraham and its sign was the sign of circumcision for all men. God’s promise was that Abraham would be the father of many people and that they would be a blessing to many other people.
- c. The 3<sup>rd</sup> was the covenant with the nation Israel entered into at Mount Sinai and its basis was the law.
- d. The 4<sup>th</sup> is the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> covenant was entered into by God specifically with the Jewish people. The 4<sup>th</sup> covenant, the covenant in Jesus Christ is for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. Sadly, in all four of the covenants, most of the people have rejected God reaching out to them. God is still reaching out today. In the very last book of the Bible, Revelation (3:20), we have Jesus saying, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in . . .” Today, God is still trying to enter into covenant with His people through Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ is knocking and all of us have the choice either to open the door and let Him in or refuse.

4. The Israelites had the law –

It was the Israelites whom God had chosen specifically to give His law to. God had told them how He wanted them to live. They could not plead ignorance of God’s will. While there might still be some people in the world today who can plead ignorance to God’s law and his will, we are certainly not some of them.

5. The Israelites had “the privilege of worshiping him” –

I wonder if we might approach our Sunday mornings and coming to church differently if we considered it a privilege to worship Him! To think anything less is to not fully grasp the gift of grace and mercy God has given us in His Son. God had given the Jewish people a very special and unique way to approach Him, and to remove their sins with the prescribed sacrifices. Many still rejected Him and refused to open the door and enter in.

6. The Israelites had the promises

The Israelites could not say that they did not know the destiny that God had planned for them. God had told them of their task and the end result of that which awaited them, if only they could be somewhat faithful, God would be even more faithful. Not only did the Israelites have God’s promises back then, as Christians we have God’s promises today. In some of my devotion reading this past week it was quoting from Henri Nouwen and his great book *The Wounded Healer* which is a book about Christian ministry and Christianity in general:

“A Christian is a man or woman of hope whose strength is based neither on self-confidence derived from his or her personality, nor on specific expectations for the future, but on a promise given to him or her. . . Every attempt to attach this hope of visible symptoms in our surroundings, becomes a temptation when it prevents us from the realization that promises, not concrete successes, are the basis of Christianity . . . Building a vocation on the expectations of concrete results, however conceived, is like building a house on sand instead of solid rock.”

Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*

7. The Israelites had the fathers – Abraham, Isaac & Jacob (v. 5)

**8. And then the culmination, the fulfillment, Jesus himself.**

*Christ himself was an Israelite as far as human history is concerned. And he is God, the one who rules over everything and is worthy of eternal praise!*

From Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, the Israelites, God's chosen people, chosen to be a blessing to all people, came the chosen one, the Anointed One of God. All else had been a preparation for this. And yet most of the Jewish people at Jesus' coming, rejected him.

Perhaps the biggest pain and the greatest grief in one's life is to have the opportunity to give one's own children every chance for success: to sacrifice; to save; to work, and then to have your child, through disobedience, rebellion, or selfishness fail to grasp it. Therein lies one of the greatest tragedies in life. The tragedy of Israel was that God had prepared her for the day of the coming of His Son – and all the preparation was cast aside because they failed to grasp it. It was not because God's law had been broken, or that they had not been perfectly faithful, it was that God's love had been spurned. It's not the anger, but the broken heart of God which lies behind Paul's words in this part of his letter.

All this is just in the first five verses of chapter 9. But then Paul just expands on the issue that he raises in those first five verses. <sup>6</sup> *Well then, has God failed to fulfill his promise to Israel? No, for not all who are born into the nation of Israel are truly members of God's people!* <sup>7</sup> *Being descendants of Abraham doesn't make them truly Abraham's children...* <sup>8</sup> *This means that Abraham's physical descendants are not necessarily children of God. Only the children of the promise are considered to be Abraham's children.* Even in Abraham, Isaac & Jacob's day, not all of their descendants, not all Israelites, were considered by God to be His children. The same is still true today. We do not become children of God by the family we are born into. That is true whether you are born into a Jewish family today or an ethnic Mennonite family, or any family here on earth.

We don't become children of God by descent. Then Paul tells us a little further along that we don't become children of God by what we do. <sup>16</sup> *We can neither choose it nor work for it.*

So, we are faced with the same dilemma at the end of this week's message as we were faced with at the end of last week's message. What really is it that saves us, makes us adopted as children of God, and more importantly how much is in our control and how much is of God? And if we go just by what we read here in Romans 9, we seem to have very little.

God chose the entire nation of Israel to be his people, for his divine purposes. He did not necessarily chose all the Israelites for salvation. As Paul wrote in his letter to the early Christians in Ephesus: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.* Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

The one thing that Paul does not address in Romans 9 is the role of faith, especially in the life of the Israelites. He begins to touch on it a little for the Gentiles in v. 30. As Douglas Moo points out in his commentary on Romans, particularly Romans 9, "Faith cannot be omitted from the salvation equation. However much we want to claim that salvation is based on God's choice, we must also insist that the human decision to believe is also both real and critical. The Bible teaches in passages such as this that God is the one who ultimately determines, by his own free decision, who is to be saved. But it the Bible also teaches that every human being is called upon to respond to God's offer of salvation in faith. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation stand in some tension with one another."

Here is my big question from Romans 9, “if Paul really believed that human beings had no role in the matter, that it was all decided by God before hand, why is he so upset and grieved by his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters for rejecting their long awaited, promised Messiah, whom God sent? If it was all God, he should be upset at God and not his Jewish brothers and sisters.

Jesus said, “*For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). The disciple Peter writes in his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9).

Since the coming of Jesus, his death on the cross and his resurrection, the only thing that saves any human being – whether Jew or Gentile – is belief and faith in Him, trusting that He is the one who He claimed to be. Jesus’ question to the representative disciple Peter must be answered by all men and women: “who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are now Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:15-18).

Jesus was not saying that Peter was the rock. His confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of the living God is the rock. Jesus himself is the rock! Our passage this morning ends with these words:

*<sup>31</sup> But the people of Israel, who tried so hard to get right with God by keeping the law, never succeeded. <sup>32</sup> Why not? Because they were trying to get right with God by keeping the law instead of by trusting in him. They stumbled over the great rock in their path. <sup>33</sup> God warned them of this in the Scriptures when he said, “I am placing a stone in Jerusalem that makes people stumble, a rock that makes them fall. But anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.”*

The great tragedy is Paul’s day when he wrote his letter to the early Christians in Rome was that many of his Jewish brothers and sisters stumbled over the great rock in their path and they rejected the free gift from God of salvation which comes by grace through faith in Him. The great tragedy in our day is that many, both Jews and non Jews, still stumble over the great rock in their path and spurn the love that God has offered us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

That’s the question that each and every single one of us has to answer, not just once but each and every day – “Who do you say Jesus is?” He either is your all in all or He is nothing at all.