

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 4, 2016**

WHAT ABOUT THE JEWS?

Romans 9:1-9

The Letter to the Romans is the apostle Paul's *magnum opus* of Christian theology, and is the most extensive and systematic exposition of the doctrines of the Christian faith anywhere in the New Testament. The portion of the letter we are about to begin to explore – Romans 9-11 – is the most difficult to grasp, as it deals with the much-disputed and often-misunderstood doctrine of election (or predestination) and God's plan for the Jews.

We begin today by reading from Romans 9:1-9. With our hearts and minds yielded to the Holy Spirit, may we give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God's holy Word.

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PAUL'S PASSION FOR THE JEWS

It is sad but true that hardly anybody writes letters anymore. Tweets, texts, and emails, along with social media posts on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, are our predominant means of communicating with others. Before all of these came along – and, going back even further, before the advent of the telephone – people used to write letters. A person's letters often provided a glimpse into that person's heart.

This is certainly true in Paul's Letter to the Romans. Here, at the beginning of Romans 9, Paul reveals the anguish of his heart for the Jewish people over their rejection of Jesus, and his passionate longing for them to be saved. As he thinks about the Jewish people – *his* people – and their rejection of the gospel, he says: "... (Y)ou need to know that I carry with me at all times a huge sorrow. It's an enormous pain deep within me, and I'm never free from it" (Romans 9:2, *MSG*).

You can understand that. If someone you love has turned away from God, has rejected the gospel and gone his or her own way in life, and sees no need for Jesus and His saving work, this feeling of sorrow and anguish and grief is always present in your heart, isn't it? You have a pain in your heart that just won't go away.

That is how Paul felt about the Jews, who were, after all, his people. They were his family. He was one of them. He was proud of his Jewish heritage. He loved his Jewish brothers and sisters. His anguish over their spiritual condition was so deep that he says if it were possible, he would be willing to be cut off from Christ and cast into hell, if it would bring about their salvation (9:3). That is how much he cared about them. Their spiritual condition was breaking his heart.

There is an old story – possibly apocryphal – about a young man undergoing his “trial” for ordination as a minister. In the Presbyterian tradition, to become an ordained minister, you have to jump through a series of hoops, including becoming a candidate under the care of your presbytery; fulfilling all the academic requirements of a Master of Divinity degree; passing the written ordination exams covering theology and sacraments, biblical exegesis, and church government; preaching a sermon for the presbytery; and surviving an ordination exam or “trial” conducted by the presbytery as a whole. During this young man’s ordination trial, a venerable elder statesman in this particular presbytery with a reputation for asking hard questions rose to pose this question to the young man: “Would you be willing to be damned for the glory of God?”

How do you answer a question like that? Since the chief end of man is to glorify God, shouldn’t we be willing to do *anything* and *everything* that would bring glory to God? But the second part of our chief end is to enjoy God forever. How can I enjoy God forever when I’m in hell?

It sounds like a trick question that has no right answer. As the story goes the young man paused for a moment and then said: “No, sir, I confess that I would not be willing to be damned for the glory of God. But I would be willing for *you* to be damned for the glory of God!” (Ha!)

Paul is saying: “If I could, if it were possible, if there were some way I could be cursed and cut off from Christ so that my people could be made right with God, I would do it in a minute.” The truth, of course, is that Paul could not. It wasn’t possible for him to be damned for the sake of the Jewish people. It wasn’t possible for him to trade places with them. There is only One who can trade places with us. Only Jesus can trade places with us. Only Jesus can take the curse upon Himself that we deserve. Only Jesus. The good news is that Jesus *has* traded places with us in His suffering and death on the cross. He has done for us what only He can do.

As much as you may love another person – your husband, wife, son, daughter, parent, grandparent, friend – you cannot trade places with them. You cannot pay for their sins. You cannot do it. Only Jesus can.

I am convicted by the depth of Paul’s feeling, the depth of his love for the Jews, the depth of his pain over their spiritual condition. Do I have a similar sorrow or anguish in my heart over the spiritual lostness of family members, friends, or neighbors? The answer, I confess is: Not usually. Do you?

Paul’s passion for the spiritual well-being of the Jewish people (and, we know, his passion for Gentiles to know Christ as well) is an example for us to emulate, because he models for us the heart of Jesus Himself for spiritually lost people. Perhaps, as a first step, we need to pray – each of us, intentionally, diligently, sincerely – that the Lord will cultivate in our hearts the same kind of passionate concern for unbelievers in our world that Paul had for the Jewish people, a passion that will push us into loving, Christ-like witness to seek to bring unbelieving family members, neighbors, and friends to saving faith in the Lord Jesus.

Will you make that your prayer? Will you ask the Lord to do that in your heart?

THE PRIVILEGES OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

The Jews, as Paul points out in verses 4 and 5, were the beneficiaries of all kinds of spiritual privileges. They had all kinds of things going for them that make their failure to embrace and follow the Messiah all the more puzzling. Paul identifies specific advantages of the Jews:

First of all, they had “the adoption as sons”, which is to say, they were chosen by God to be His people and blessed in ways no other nation on earth was blessed. Second, they received “the divine glory” – the *shekinah* glory of God, His visible splendor in the pillar of cloud that led the people of Israel in the wilderness, that stood above the tabernacle, that filled the temple in Jerusalem at its dedication by Solomon, the glory that symbolized the presence of God with the people of Israel. Theirs, too, were the covenants with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David, through which God committed Himself to His people.

Fourth, it was to the Jews – to the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob – that the law was given to govern their personal, social, political, and religious life. For the most devout among them, the law of Moses was “their dearest and greatest treasure” (Ray Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory, Vol. II*, 12). Fifth, they had both the privilege of and the God given prescriptions for worship in the tabernacle and, later, the temple. They knew how God wanted them to approach Him in worship. In addition, they had God’s promises. His covenant promises. His promises to bless them. And, most of all, the promise of the Messiah who was to come.

Theirs, too, were the patriarchs, the heroic figures from their history God had blessed and used to carry out His purposes. We have our “founding fathers” and national heroes, like Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, Lincoln, and others. They had theirs, too – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons, Moses, Joshua, and David – a heritage of greatness in which they took pride.

Eighth, on top of it all, “from them (the Jews) is traced the human ancestry of Christ” (9:5). Jesus Himself – the blessing above all blessings, the Messiah sent from God – was a Jew. The nation of Israel was the channel through which God gave the promised Messiah and Savior to the world.

A SLAM-DUNK?

With all these blessings, all these privileges, all these advantages, you would think it would be a slam-dunk for the Jewish people as a whole to welcome Jesus with open arms, to embrace him with their whole hearts, to accept Him and believe in Him and follow Him eagerly. But that is not what happened. For the most part, the Jewish people rejected Him. The first followers of Jesus, it is true – the first Christian believers – were Jewish. And, it is true, there are Christians of Jewish background today, including right here in our church family. But it wasn’t long before the church, still in the time of the New Testament, became increasingly Gentile in make-up.

Because of Jewish opposition to the gospel, Paul would become the apostle to the Gentiles, which would turn out to be a blessing for all of us who are non-Jews.

If we learn anything from the Jews and their forfeiture of the gift of salvation through unbelief, it is that salvation is not based on ancestry. Lots of people today are interested in tracing their ancestry. Discovering your roots and your family connections is a worthwhile endeavor. You may be surprised at what you find. But no matter who shows up in your family tree, your ancestry cannot save you. You cannot inherit salvation from your ancestors. Having Christian parents doesn't make you a Christian. Having a pastor or a missionary in your family tree won't get you into heaven. It is all by grace and only by grace – grace received through trusting faith in Jesus Christ and Him alone.

We have only just begun to dig into Paul's teaching about God's sovereignty in salvation and His plan for the Jews as the apostle spells it out in Romans 9, 10, and 11. Whatever questions remain, and there may be plenty, understand this and take it to heart: God's word, as Paul says in verse 6, has not failed. His plans for the Jews – and for you and me – have not failed. God's promises have not failed. His promise to save everyone who comes to Him through faith in His Son Jesus Christ has not failed. His saving purposes have not failed. And will not fail. For, as I will continue to remind you, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). No condemnation. And no separation: "For I am convinced that (nothing and no one anywhere) in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

It is all of grace, which means it comes free of charge to people like us who don't deserve it and never will.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.