

Privileged for the Praise of One

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on February 13, 2022.

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).¹

Like a charge of victory, a rallying cry of the elect, Paul exclaims, “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). Nothing temporal nor spiritual, nothing today or forever, nothing in or out of time and space, no one or nothing can separate us from God’s love for us in Christ. It is a statement of truth both exhilarating and comforting, celebratory and assuring.

While such truth gives assurance of our own salvation, what about those who have not believed? How many of us have family, friends, and neighbors who have not confessed with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believed with their heart that God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9)? As Christians, we know with certainty that “with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Rom. 10:10), but how many of our loved ones have rejected the gospel, are under God’s wrath, awaiting imminent judgment? How many of those we know don’t *know* Jesus and are destined for hell? Such thoughts should not rob us of the joy of our own assurance, but they should encourage humility, and lead us to lament the peril of the lost.

Such is Paul’s lamentation for his “kinsmen according to the flesh” (9:3 NET). He knows they need the gospel, and he’s not ashamed to preach it, “for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). But as a chosen people, as a favored nation, to whom the gospel was first delivered, they rejected their Messiah, they denounced his gospel, they crucified their King. Though the gospel is the power of God for salvation, they treated it as powerless, revealing their lack of faith in the God they professed to serve.

It is a sad testimony indeed, one that warrants humility on our part but also trust in the sovereignty of God. For, Paul’s lamentation does not reject God’s loving purpose, nor imply that God has failed. To be clear, Paul explains, “it is not as though the word of God has failed” (Rom. 9:6). On the contrary, it is true of Jew and Gentile alike: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. . . . And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29-30). Paul does not mourn because God has failed Israel, nor does he question his

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

sovereign, redemptive purposes. But on this side of heaven, he has “great sorrow” and “unceasing anguish” as he sees his kin reject the gospel. Only God knows those whom he foreknew and predestined, but the outward evidence of Israel’s rejection of Christ disheartens. Paul knows that those who are not justified through faith will never be glorified but are doomed, and so he laments with a fleshly lamentation.

A Fleshly Lamentation

As if to convince us of his sincerity or to solemnize his admission, with a clear conscience by the Holy Spirit, and speaking the truth as a Christian, Paul reveals his inner turmoil. So burdened is he with “great sorrow” and “unceasing anguish” in his “heart” (9:2), he wantonly wishes that he could sacrifice his own salvation for the sake of his “people,” his “fellow countrymen” (9:3 NET). If he could, he would willingly be “accursed,” suffering the damnation of hell and “cast off from Christ” without hope of salvation (9:3). It is a startlingly somber statement, seemingly sabotaging the celebration of the preceding verses. But his sobriety has purpose beyond his confession.

The truth is, as Paul knows it, he cannot become accursed. As he was saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ, it was not his own doing but an inconvertible gift (Eph. 2:8-9). Nor can he be cut off from Christ—nothing can “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). There are no returns or exchanges with God’s gift of salvation. What God has done “according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will,”² he has done. Paul can neither nullify his redemption nor transfer it to his kin, and he knows it all too well. But it doesn’t keep his heart from breaking, and that’s the point.

In an age of isolating protectionism, selfish ambition, and obsession with individual rights, it is easy to concern yourself with *you*, even distorting the doctrine of sovereign grace into a smug indifference for the perishing, especially those who don’t share your opinions. Paul’s lamentation sounds foreign to ears trained to the dialect of self-interest. We hear of “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), and we rightly rejoice. We hear of the Spirit’s indwelling presence and the life he brings (Rom. 8:9-10), and we certainly celebrate. We hear of our adoption as children of God and his fatherly love for us (Rom. 8:15-17), and we justly joy in it. We hear of God’s foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification, and we are appropriately astonished at the sovereign grace of God. But when our assurance leads to indifference, we treat the gospel as a gift to be hidden and harbored rather than a treasure to be shared.

Paul wants to share the treasure with his family. He wants them to know of God’s love in giving his only Son. He wants them to believe in him that they should not perish. He wants them to have eternal life. He wants them to believe this gospel delivered first to them and from them to the world. He wants his family, his friends, his neighbors, even those who sought to kill him (Acts 22:22), those whom he refers to as “brothers and fathers” (Acts 22:1), to know “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16) is in Christ alone. And what breaks Paul’s heart should break ours too.

² “The Westminster Confession of Faith” 3.5, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 14.

Christian, can you honestly say that you wish you were “accursed” and “cut off from Christ” for the sake of your neighbor? It’s a telling question, isn’t it? Sadly, we who are often so eager to trumpet the doctrines of grace and fight for the Christian good of our culture are often the same ones who couldn’t care less for the eternal soul of our neighbor. In our zeal for the moral good of our country, we often seem content for our countrymen to burn in hell. Perhaps the culture war we’re supposedly fighting is a distraction from the souls we should be winning. Whatever the case, it should break our heart that our heart does not break for the lost. Let this be a point of examination: Do you love your neighbor as yourself? As James counsels, let us “speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:12-13). May we who have received mercy be motivated by it: “Mercy triumphs over judgment,” indeed.

A Favored Nation

Of course, as we think about Paul’s concern for his kin and countrymen, we must realize that they were not just *any* other country. Unlike any country before or since, they were a favored nation; ancient Israel was the one and only. As Paul describes, “To them belong the adoption as sons, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from, by human descent, came Christ” (9:4-5). Paul’s sanctified desire is not just for any people but for the Israelites, those whom God adopted in Abraham to be a “great nation” through whom “the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2-3). For no inherent reason God chose the children of Jacob (or Israel), the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, setting them aside to be his people. Such a distinction did not convey salvation but through them salvation came, in Christ Jesus, one of “their race, according to the flesh” (9:5).

With Israel, “the splendour of the divine presence” (9:4 NEB) dwelled, in the tabernacle and the temple. To Israel was given the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants, pointing toward the New Covenant of Christ. As Israel’s covenant Maker and Keeper, God gave them the guardian of his divine will, divine instruction for worship, the Spirit-carried promises. Reaching all the way back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and pointing all the way forward to Christ, from the promise through the people of the promise to the promised One, the Israelites were a people most privileged (and best positioned) to believe. And as a whole, they did not.

There is much to be said in coming sermons of God’s sovereign purpose and Israel’s plight, but at this point I want to focus on this often-misunderstood point: Privilege does not presume pardon. Though an Israelite could trace his family tree back to Abraham, heritage does not save. Though God gave Abraham the sign and seal of circumcision, and to Israel through him, circumcision does not save. Though God gave Moses the law, the perfect revelation of his will, the law does not save. Though there is great benefit in privilege, it does not presume pardon. As Paul reminds the Israelites, Abraham was not “justified by works” but “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Rom. 4:2-3). He was justified by faith, not favor.

This should serve as a reminder to us as we consider the privileges of the New Covenant. There is great privilege in being raised in a Christian home, in receiving the sign and seal of baptism, in hearing the gospel preached. But unless you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you are not counted right in God’s sight. The home in which you were raised can teach moral goodness, but

it cannot make you good enough for heaven. Baptism may set you apart as a child of the Covenant, but unless there is conversion, you are judged a covenant-breaker. The gospel is the good news we believe, but unless we believe it, it's not good news. Examine your heart, even in this moment, and do not spurn the favor of God. We are a privileged people, but only faith in Christ will save you.

A Fatal Rejection

Paul's lamentation for Israel is not hyperbole. He knows the eternal consequences of rejecting Christ. He knew then, as we know today, that all, Jew and Gentile alike, who do not believe on the Lord Jesus Christ will spend eternity in hell. There is no favored status in the Lake of Fire, only torment, eternal anguish, regardless of race. And so, we join Paul in lamenting but also in praying for the people through whom, "according to the flesh," came Jesus Christ our Lord. Even today we pray for the Israelite, wherever he or she may be found, trusting in the sovereign grace of God to advance his gospel, bring new life by his Spirit, and unite the child of Israel with Israel's Messiah. As our Larger Catechism teaches us, "we pray, that the kingdom of sin and Satan be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in."³ Our hearts, and therefore our prayers, are for all who would see Jesus for who he is, "the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever" (9:5).

For Jesus was born a child of Israel, the son of the virgin, born under the law that he might fulfill it in righteousness. And though he is "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,"⁴

"he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:8-11).

For this reason, our gospel zeal is ultimately an appeal to worship God: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4-5).

By God's grace we are privileged for the praise of One, not hiding or harboring such favor, but sharing, indeed shouting, "Let the nations be glad and sing for joy..." (Ps. 67:4a): "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Rev. 5:12); "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13b).

As we are privileged for the praise of One, let us share the treasure: "Let heaven and earth praise the Lord" (Ps. 69:34).

³ "The Larger Catechism" Q. 191, *Ibid.*, 342.

⁴ "The Nicene Creed" in *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 846.