

Some of the most exhilarating experiences, like the birth of a child, can be tinged with some of the deepest sorrow, like the death of a close family member or friend. It was only a month after my father-in-law died that I first held my infant son. Thoughts of the cycle of life kept racing through my head. For whatever reasons, the heights of our joy can intensify the depths of our sorrow.

Something similar happened to Paul as he exulted in the thought of God’s salvation, but in his joy he recognized that his own people, whom he loved deeply, knew nothing of the joy that was his. A cloud passed over his bright sun as he contemplated Israel’s rejection of Jesus the Lord.

There is a striking intensity in the Apostle’s words as he tries to impress on his readers how passionately he feels about the condition of his own people. He insists he is telling the truth, adds that he is not lying, appeals to his own conscience, and adds the testimony of the Holy Spirit as he speaks of heaviness of heart and “*unceasing anguish*” (v. 2).

The degree of his sorrow and anguish is expressed by a suggestion so extreme that if it had not been introduced under these circumstances it would have been dismissed as pure hyperbole. He actually says that he would gladly be cursed, *anathema*, cut off from Christ—if it would help in the redemption of his kinsfolk. The verb “*wish*” in verse 3 is in the imperfect tense and could be translated “I have wished” or “I used to wish,” in which case the attitude described might relate to Paul’s pre-conversion days rather than his present feelings; but no one knows for sure. It would appear that he, like Moses, would gladly suffer the ultimate sacrifice if it were possible, and if it would do any good. This, as Calvin said, is “a spark from the fire of Christ’s substitutionary love.”

While Paul was justifiably proud of his Greek culture and his Roman citizenship, it was his Jewish heritage that was nearest and dearest to his

heart. To be a member of the people of God was, to him, the most magnificent privilege, for the name Israelite was itself a reminder of God's special intervention in the life of Jacob leading to the identification of his descendants as a unique people. To be Jewish was to be a part of the "*adoption to sonship*," (v. 4) or the special invitation from Yahweh to be his family. The Jews alone had seen the glory, or as the rabbis called it, the *Shekinah*—referring to God's glory and presence with them in the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire during the wilderness wanderings. Only with the Israelites had the Lord entered into covenants such as those that promised land to Abraham and a dynasty to David; and only to them had he also given the privilege of knowing his law. It was to the Israelites alone that the "service of God" or the order of worship in both Tabernacle and Temple was revealed, and only to them and through them had promises for all humankind been made.

The long line of fathers stretched back through the remarkable history of Paul's people, but more than anything in recent history Christ had come from eternity into the turmoil of human history through the people of Israel. If the NIV translation is to be taken at face value, it means that "*God over all, forever praised!*" (v. 5) is responsible for Christ's coming in such a manner and should be blessed forever. The emphasis is on God's gracious intervention by sending his one and only Son.

Israel's rejection of Christ, then, does more than just stir deep emotions; it raises profound questions that Paul was constantly required to address in his ministry. The first question was something like this: "How could Paul's gospel be true when the Israelites had rejected it? Wasn't their rejection proof that Paul's message was false?" Alternatively, "How could God be called faithful, if he rejected those he had first chosen to be his people, because of their rejection of Christ?" Calvin summarized the dilemma as follows: "Either...there is no truth to the divine promise, or...Jesus, whom Paul preached, is not the Lord's Messiah who had been promised to the Jews."

It's clear that Paul felt it necessary to address the whole problem of Israel's rejection of Christ not only because it weighed so heavily on his own heart but also because the questions that were raised were profoundly significant. He tackled the problem in characteristic fashion, concluding these three things in chapter 9 of his letter:

- 1) **The Word of God is not invalidated.** The Word of God speaks powerfully about God's complete freedom to act as he chooses. This is clearly illustrated in his dealings with Israel in general and the lineage of Christ through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in particular. The result was that there were two kinds of children of Abraham—those who were “*children by physical descent*” and those who were “*children of the promise*” (v. 8). Paul thinks this distinction is still operative in the sense that some of the people of Israel gladly acknowledge Jesus as the Christ while others reject him. There were *always* two Israels. So in the end, the situation Paul was dealing with was not new.
- 2) **The sovereignty of God is illuminated.** In the touching conversation between God and Moses recorded in Exodus 33:12-23 and quoted here by the Apostle, there is clear evidence of God's insistence that he is free to deal even with Moses as he sees fit. Never has there been a man more in need of divine reassurance than Moses. Confronting impossible odds and battling seemingly endless difficulties, all he wanted was a sense of divine presence and some indication that the Lord was really with him. Paul goes on in verse 19 to anticipate the obvious response to his reasoning: “One of you will say to me: “*Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?*” Paul answers this predictable objection with a third important point from chapter 9...
- 3) **The consistency of God is illustrated.** Paul quotes at length from the prophet Hosea, showing God's ancient commitment to make

those who were “*not my people*” accepted as “*my people.*” From Isaiah he substantiates the fact that God has previously turned away from his rebellious people but has always left himself a “*remnant*” or “*descendants*” by way of the promise that brighter times lie ahead. God continues to do this in this time of Israel’s rejection, as is clearly seen by Paul’s own conversion to Christ. God’s consistency is therefore maintained, and all the Apostle has to do is to reiterate his own witness to the Gospel.

“*What then shall we say?*” he asks in verse 30. What can any of us say? I want to show you a picture that I took on Monday afternoon coming home from Philadelphia. I took this picture through the windshield of our car so I wouldn’t miss it. I was in awe of the westward sky after we had come through a driving rain. I was afraid I would miss the moment if I waited even five minutes longer. The brilliant sun emerging from the dark clouds gave us this awe-inspiring view. So I’m thrilled to share with you my photo of that moment from the drive home last Monday.

But you may not think much of it. Paul was thinking he simply had to share his awe-inspiring view of Jesus Christ with his kinsfolk. His arguments are not very easy to follow and his teaching is by no means easy to comprehend. But, we can see that the Apostle is determined not to miss this opportunity to answer criticisms of his gospel and in so doing he’ll show how the gospel is a thoroughly consistent extension of what God has been doing since Abraham. **Paul desperately wants to show his readers the brilliant sunshine of the gospel emerging from the clouds of rejection.** God is superbly sovereign in his dealings with us, yet he has maintained the dignity of every human being created in his image.

Yes, even our stumbling shows how thoroughly consistent God has been. For through the prophet Isaiah, God said, “*See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame*” (Romans 9:33). Amen.