

“Sorrow Into Joy”

Romans 9:1-5

August 3, 2014

8th Sunday After Pentecost

What is your most intense desire? Something you'd be willing to give up EVERYTHING you had in order to obtain it? Would it be a great sports achievement? Would it be a great job with a wonderful salary? Would it be winning the lottery? While many people would like such things, they probably wouldn't sacrifice everything to get them. Total sacrifice would likely be only for people. Would you give up everything for your spouse? Your children? Your parents? Would you give up everything for relatives who have consistently been unkind to you, have rejected you, and treated you badly? Of course not! How silly to ask!

Yet that's what we are dealing with in our text for today. In chapters 9-11 of Romans, Paul writes of the relationship between God and the Israelites after they had rejected the Gospel. Paul is very emotional about this. He says, "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." What brought about this great sorrow and anguish? The Israelites had rejected Christ and now were outside of God's salvation.

Paul is serious about this. He goes on to say, "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." Paul says he would be willing to give up everything for his fellow Israelites. He would even be willing to be "accursed", that is condemned to hell and to be "cut off from Christ" for the sake of his unsaved kinsmen according to the flesh.

Why is Paul so distressed and so frustrated? It's not just that the Israelites had rejected Christ, rejected the Gospel, and were outside God's salvation now, but that they reached this state despite the fact that they had every advantage and every blessing God had to offer. Paul writes, "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.”

They had been adopted as God’s children by God Himself. They had witnessed the glory of God on Sinai and in the Temple. God had made personal covenants with them – with Abraham, at Sinai, and with David. They had the Law of God, the correct worship of God and all the promises of God for the future. On top of all this, the Christ – the Messiah – the Savior – would be born from their race. Yet they still blew it! No wonder Paul was beside himself with grief and frustration. Such love he had for these people that he wanted to give up his own salvation for theirs even they had rejected and persecuted him for preaching Christ. One commentator put it this way:

“[Paul] speaks, not with the soured malice of a renegade who gloats over the doom of the people which has cast him out, but in love. He speaks with the love of a Moses, who was willing to be blotted from the book of God for his apostate people’s sake when the Lord’s wrath burned hot against the men who had bowed down before the golden calf. (Ex. 32:32) He speaks with the love of a Jesus, who interceded for His enemies and gave His life for them.” (Franzmann, p.167)

What about us? Do you ever have the same kind of sorrow and anguish for those around us who are not saved? I don’t think we even think of them much, if at all. Do you ever desire to give up something so that others might be saved? I don’t think any of us would share Paul’s passion and be willing to give up our own salvation for the sake of others. But are we even willing to give up a little time and effort so that others might know the Gospel and be saved? We don’t have to go to the ends of the earth to do this. We don’t even have to go to the church’s booth at the fair. What about our fellow Lutherans? Do you ever get frustrated with Lutherans who, like the Israelites, had every advantage to obtaining salvation and every blessing God had to give: adoption as His children in Baptisms, the Word of God, the Sacraments, a Church, Sunday School, Confirmation Class, solid, Scriptural worship and all the promises of God – yet they still blew it?

We may commend Paul for his willingness to give up everything for the salvation of the Israelites. We may criticize ourselves for our lack of willingness to give up anything for the salvation even of our fellow Lutherans. However, the fact of the matter is none of this self-sacrificing would be of any good anyway. Paul could give himself up to hell. We could do the same. However, giving up our salvation would not help a single Israelite or a single Lutheran be saved.

Why? On our own, each of us is already traveling the road to hell that we have constructed by our sin. None of us can even save ourselves from condemnation and damnation. It is certain, therefore, that we can't do anything to save anyone else from it. The Word of God says, "Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life," (Psalm 49:7) No matter how hard our efforts or how noble of a personal sacrifice we might propose, nothing would be sufficient.

The good news is that such an effort or such a sacrifice is not necessary. There is One who came and desired to be condemned. There is One who came to be cut off from God. Not only did He desire to be condemned and cut off from God, but He actually was cut off from God and suffered hell itself. And, not only was He accursed and cut off from God, but this condemnation which He experienced was for our benefit, so that we might never be cut off from God and condemned to hell.

I'm talking, of course, about the Son of God, Jesus Christ. He came to take our place under God's Law and under God's holy anger against sin. By bearing our sin upon the cross, Jesus was cut off from God as He hung upon the cross. So intense and soul-shattering was this experience that Jesus could scarcely bear it. It led Him to cry out, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) Jesus was forsaken by God the Father for the sake of your sin, my sin, and the sin of all people who have ever lived or ever will live so that God the Father would never have to forsake anyone – pagans or believers, Israelites or Lutherans, those who have had very little way to know the Gospel and those who have had every possible gift by which to know the Gospel.

But more than simply being separated from His Father, Jesus was accursed. Paul writes in Galatians, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Gal. 3:13) Jesus endured hell and all of its torments so that no one – life-long pagans or life-long people of God – would ever have to be accursed by God and sent to hell.

Paul’s emotions and feelings about his kinsmen according to the flesh – the Israelites – are commendable. He has great sorrow and unceasing anguish for those close to him who have rejected Christ and the Gospel. We could learn from that. Instead of thinking only of ourselves and our own personal salvation, let us take time to think of those who are not saved. Instead of only thinking, “Well, it’s too bad to be them”, let us also have great sorrow and unceasing anguish for the lost. And instead of thinking only of some vague group of people on a vague mission field somewhere on the other side of the world, let us think of our kinsmen according to the flesh – those who are close to us and related to us. Think of those in your family who do not have faith in Christ or, having had faith in Christ, no longer do. It might be your physical relatives – a son or a daughter, father or mother, and so on. It might be your spiritual relatives – those fellow Lutherans who have fallen away from the faith.

However, you don’t have to emulate Paul’s strong desire to be accursed and cut off from Christ for the people you are thinking of. It is not something you can do to help them. It’s not something you have to do to help them. Our Lord Jesus Christ has already done that for them, just as He has done for you. He suffered and died on a cross where He was cut off from His Father and accursed for us. He rose from the grave and lived that we might be united with our Father in heaven through the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus on the cross and have eternal life in heaven, not hell.

Rather, pray for these people that they may come to faith or return to faith as the case may be. Then use the gifts which Jesus gave to establish His Church for they are the same gifts which strengthen and fortify the Church. While Paul laments the fact that the Israelites failed, even

though they had all the gifts, He never says those gifts were ineffective or needed to be replaced. Neither should we. Just because some people have fallen away does not mean God's gifts are ineffective or need to be replaced either.

Continue to call people back to their baptisms where they were adopted as children of God. Proclaim the Law of God in all of its severity to bring forth fear and repentance in people comfortable in sin. Proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in all of its sweetness to bring forth forgiveness and comfort to people broken by sin. Invite people back to Church so that they may experience solid Scriptural worship where the Word of God is preached and God's sacraments are distributed for the joy and edification of God's people. Invite people to Sunday School and Bible class so that people may grow, not only in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, but in the knowledge of Him, too. Remind people of all the promises God has kept and all the promises yet to come.

The task may be daunting simply because of the numbers. I believe Paul was so sorrowful because so many of his people in his time had rejected the Gospel. You may be just as sad over the great number of our people in our time have also rejected the Gospel. Don't despair and don't give up! But rejoice and keep on sharing the gifts of God. Jesus said, "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10) So, as people come to the faith or return to the faith, one by one, let there be joy before the people of God over each sinner who repents and trusts in Jesus Christ. Amen.