

**Don't Give Up on Anyone**

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Romans 9:1-5

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— <sup>2</sup> I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. <sup>3</sup> For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. <sup>4</sup> They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; <sup>5</sup> to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

## STRUGGLE

These past few weeks the apostle Paul has told us that the coming of God's kingdom is not going to be easy. It's going to be a struggle.

We will struggle with our own failure to do the right thing.  
We will struggle to trust the steadfast love of God when we live in a world that is constantly changing ... and often not for the better

Paul said that it's like the whole creation is in the throes of childbirth.  
When new life begins there is a struggle.  
There is, at the same time, a sense of joy and fear.

This describes childbirth.  
This describes creation.  
This describes our lives.

Each week I know that our congregation is filled with people who are struggling.  
How do we struggle?  
Let me count the ways.

Death, divorce, conflict,  
job loss, financial problems,

wayward children, elderly parents, the effects of old age ....

Have I included us all by now?

I know that I've included me and those that I love most deeply.

Struggle is a fact of life for all of us.

But, I have found that we often try to hide our struggles.

Ask someone, "How are you?"

What is the most likely response?

"Oh, fine."

And yet, quite often we're not so fine.

Thoreau suggested that most men and women live lives of "quiet desperation."

We all struggle.

But, we many of us have been taught from an early age to keep the struggle inside.

Keep the desperation quiet.

## SORROW AND ANGUISH

We might do that.

But, Paul certainly doesn't.

Paul blurts out in verse 2 what many of us are afraid to say out loud:

"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."

When I went to seminary, I took a course entitled systematic theology.

The aim of systematic theology is very simple.

Take all the stories, teachings and letters in the Bible and try to summarize the most important points.

We do systematic theology every Sunday.

How many of you know what part of our service is base on systematic theology?

It's when we repeat the Apostle's Creed.

The Apostle's Creed is systematic theology.

It's a very basic summary of the Bible's message.

Systematic theology can be a very helpful way to remind us of the basics of our faith.

But, there can be a problem.

We can summarize the Bible to the point that the emotion, the struggle is removed.

And that's a big part of any story... and especially the story of the Bible.

It's like the difference between reading a great work of fiction and just reading the Cliff Notes.

You might be able to get the gist of the book from Cliff Notes.

(And, as many of us can attest, you might even be able to pass the course.)

But, you never really understand the book.

You need more than just a summary of the plot.

You need to go along for the ride.

You need to experience the power of a great story.

In the same way, the Bible is more than just a summary of doctrines.

The Bible is, at least in part, the real life struggle of people who are trying to trust God in a dangerous and ever changing world. It's about that point when the world's great need intersects with the mighty acts of God.

Now don't get me wrong.

I believe in the task of theology.

We need to summarize the doctrines of the Bible so that we can understand the story as a whole.

Theology really is like the Cliff Notes of the Bible.

It can be a great instructional tool.

But, theology alone cannot convey the whole truth.

We must experience the struggle to believe.

We must experience the story.

We must experience the birth pains of a new creation.

There's an old gospel hymn that goes "I love to tell the story. Twill be my theme in glory."

I think that's what we are called to do.

We're called to tell the story ... the whole story ... and not just those parts that fit neatly into our preconceived categories.

And every story, whether it's in the Bible or if it's our own story, is filled with struggle.

Many people have misunderstood Paul's letter to the Romans because they have not treated it for what it really is. It is not a statement of theology.

It is a painfully honest account of a believer who is saying in his own way, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." (Mark 9:24)

Paul's letters are about the struggle of churches to believe and do the right thing.

Paul's letters are about his own struggle to believe and do the right thing.

And yet in the middle of this struggle, Paul's letters are also about the eternal hope of the believer. It may look like the world is falling apart, but this is not the end of the story.

Much to his credit, Paul does not give us easy answers.

Instead, unlike most of us, he bares the struggle of his soul to his fellow believers.

Are you struggling to believe in the face of failures, setbacks, threats and fears?

Let Paul's story be your guide.

Read about his struggle to believe and then think about your own struggle.

## CONTEXT

But, let me offer you a word of caution.

The Bible must be read in context.

For example, as we read Paul's letter to the Romans,

we need to think about the other things he has written, especially in this particular letter.

Each week I preach on just a small portion of Scripture as assigned by the common lectionary.

I do that to systematically preach through the Bible. Often the passages chosen by the lectionary force me to struggle with passages that are difficult and issues that I might want to avoid.

The lectionary passages from the Bible are generally pretty short.

The Bible is a big book. If a pastor preaches a sermon that is based on too many verses, you will never beat the Baptists to your favorite restaurant!

But, sometimes the lectionary passages are so short that we miss the point.

I would say that today's lesson falls into that category.

If I had all afternoon, I would preach on more than just chapter 9, verses one through five. I would preach on chapters 9-11 because they all go together. They are on the same subject, namely Paul's struggle to understand why his people, the Israelites have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

I would encourage you to read chapters 9-11 for yourself with this fact in mind.

And remember this as you read:

These chapters are not the musings of a theologian who works in the rarified air of the university. This is the heartfelt struggle of a man who loves his people and wants more than anything else for them to be saved.

## THE HEART OF AN EVANGELICAL

That's what I identify with in Paul's letters.

I identify with the personal struggle for faith.

And I identify with the struggle to understand why some people ... sometimes people we love do not believe.

This is the heart of those of us who claim the title evangelical.

(And I do, by the way, consider myself to be an evangelical.)

Evangelical Christianity has gotten some bad press recently. When we say the word “evangelical” some associate that word with a particular political viewpoint. Others, think evangelicals are people who want to condemn others.

But, I would suggest that neither of these definitions are true.

Here’s my definition of an evangelical.

Evangelicals are people who want, more than anything else, for people to come to faith.

They want people to hear the gospel, the good news of God’s grace as revealed in Jesus, and they want people to become new creations by the power of God’s grace.

And evangelicals struggle when that doesn’t happen.

They feel, like the Apostle Paul, a sense of anguish and sorrow.

There are no easy answers to this struggle.

But, it doesn’t stop us from trying to understand why some believe and some don’t.

That’s what Paul is doing in the rest of the 9th chapter of Romans.

He’s asking, “Why? Why have my people not believed in God’s grace as revealed in Jesus.

Does this mean that God has chosen someone else?

Why has God allowed me to believe while others I love deeply have rejected this message?”

And that causes Paul to say something really radical,

“I wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people ...”

This is not the statement of someone who wants people to condemn people.

On the contrary Paul would give up everything ... even his own salvation ... if that would help others come to faith.

This echoes what Moses said to God at Mt. Sinai.

After his people made the golden calf and worshipped the false god, Moses returned to God's presence on the mountain and asks God to forgive their sin.

But, then Moses adds, "... if you can't forgive my people, then judge me too. Blot me out of the book of life." (Exodus 32:30) Moses didn't want to be saved if his people couldn't be saved as well.

When people who call themselves evangelicals blithely condemn others, I think of this passage and our lesson for today. The evangelical Christian struggles with the fact that much of the world is without faith.

And we wonder why.

We feel a sense of anguish over those who are lost.

We really struggle with this.

## THE ETERNAL PROMISE OF GOD

That's what's happening in our lesson for today.

And in the verses that follow Paul is trying to understand from Scripture why his people cannot see what he sees so clearly ... that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

But, as Paul reviews the Hebrew Scripture in his mind, he remembers that the story of God's people is not a story of constant faith.

There were times when only a remnant was saved from disaster. There were times when God seemed to choose one person and rejected another.

At first glance Paul could discern no particular pattern in this history of faith.

It seemed like, for some inscrutable reason, God chose one person and didn't chose another person. The light of God would melt the heart of one person and harden the heart of another person.

In his struggle with this, Paul reasoned,  
"Well, God is the Potter and we are the clay.  
God can do what God wants to do."

(By the way, that's where some folks come up with the doctrine of double predestination.

God chooses... for God's own reasons... to save some and not others.)

But, this is where it's important for you read what Paul is saying in context.

As you read on in chapters 10 and 11 you find that Paul decides that there is, when all is said and done, an underlying theme to God's inscrutable ways.

God does not choose at random, but instead God works through the events of history to bring about a greater salvation. God has not abandoned anyone, let alone His chosen people.

Paul telegraphs this theme in our lesson for today. He lists some of the blessings that God has given His chosen people.

They were called God's children.  
They saw the glory of God.

They were given the law.  
The prophets and the founders of the faith came from the Israelites.

Indeed, we can't even understand the story of Jesus unless we first understand the story of God's chosen people.

God's people had been given all these things.  
Then why didn't they believe in the Messiah?

Paul doesn't have an answer at this point.  
But, this he does know.  
It was God who gave them these things.

And somehow, God has blessed them forever.

As we noted in our lesson last week, our love is fickle. But, the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

Romans, chapters 9-11 is a written record of the apostle's anguish over his people's lack of faith. But, in the final analysis, he comes to this conclusion,

"God does not go back on God's promises. Somehow, some way God is going to work these things out according to God's sovereign will."

## DON'T GIVE UP ON ANYONE

To say it another way, God doesn't give up on anyone.

The depth of God's love is too deep to fathom ... too deep to measure. As the hymn writer put it, "Oh the deep deep love of Jesus ..."

We may not understand how God is working in this world.  
But, this we do know.  
The deep, deep love of God in Christ will not be frustrated.  
In the end grace will triumph.

So what does this mean for us?  
What are the implications for our life?

Well, if God does not give up on us, maybe we shouldn't give up on each other.

Maybe, we can have hope that even those that are estranged from us, will one day come back home.  
Maybe, even those who are broken by life will one day be made whole.

Paul was right.  
God is the Potter, and we are the clay.  
We can't answer back to the Potter and demand that we be something different.

But, we also know ... through the life and ministry of Jesus ... what the Potter is like.  
What is the character of the Potter, the Creator of all that is, ... as revealed in Jesus?

This is not a Potter who willy nilly decides to destroy one clay pot while deciding to save another. That's not how it works. Instead the Potter is constantly ... out of love ... reshaping the world in which we live.

The Potter is trying to change enemies into friends.  
The Potter is encouraging us to love and care for the world that has been entrusted to us.

This Potter loves us so much that He is even willing to sacrifice his own Son for our salvation.

In the best of circumstances human beings may sacrifice their lives for the ones that they love.

But, the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ goes beyond this.

The Bible tells us that God's Son died for us "while we were still sinners."  
(Romans 5:8)

God didn't wait for us to become good boys and girls before God was willing to sacrifice for us.

God sacrificed everything for us while we were still dead in our sin.

Salvation always begins with the love of God.

This love is a costly love ... a love that is sacrificial.

And this love calls us to have hope ... hope for our own life ... and also hope for others.

One of the great problems in this world is that we have given up on each other.

The Democrats have given up on the Republicans ... and visa versa.

The people who live in the city have given up on the people that live in the country... and visa versa.

We have given up on those who have a different religion.

We have given up on those who have no religion.

We have given up on ever having good relations with our enemies.

The story of God as revealed in Jesus reminds us that there is always hope.

God didn't give up on us.

Maybe we shouldn't give up on each other.

Don't misunderstand.

This is not an easy answer.

This is not John Lennon singing,  
"It's easy. All you need is love."

We learn in our lesson for today that love is never easy.  
Love is a struggle.

Love is sacrifice.

Love is anguish and great sorrow.

But, God in Christ teaches us that true love never ever gives up on anyone.  
Through the Messiah, God's people have been blessed forever.

And we continue to be a part of that story.

If you think about it, this is the message of the Lord's Supper.  
His body was broken.  
His blood was shed.

He was murdered by people he loved.

But, did God give up on us?  
Did God turn His back on the world?  
No, God in Christ turned this symbol of hate into a sign of salvation.

All we need is love.

But, it's not easy.

And that's why we take time each month to remember.

We never, ever give up on anyone ...  
because God in Christ didn't give up on us.

Amen.