The Unexpected Yet Glorious Nature of God

Romans 9:1-5

"For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers"

Introduction: One of the most famous or well-known quotes about humanities interaction with and thoughts about God is by **A.W. Tozer,** a quote I've used before:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.[1]

This is both true and thought-provoking, which was one of Tozer's strengths in his teaching and writing. It reminds us that life is not about us, that we must engage our thinking if we are going to understand God, and who God IS carries the most weight in our lives. But to fully grasp the reality of what Tozer was getting at and to move away from any of our own misplaced thoughts, **C.S. Lewis** said this about the same concept:

"I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing is how we think of God.

By God Himself, it is not! ***How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important.*** *Indeed, how we think of Him is of no importance except in so far as it is related to how He thinks of us."*[2]

Since Lewis was writing decades before Tozer published his work, I don't believe Lewis was taking aim at Tozer specifically, since the phrase most likely is not purely original. This is also not to split theological hairs, but the point that Lewis makes seems to safeguard against mankind becoming the arbiter and evaluator of God. The point being made is that God is wholly other than us, and we answer to Him, not the other way around. This is consistent with what Scripture itself says:

Isaiah 55:8-9 "*For my thoughts are* ***not your thoughts****, neither are* ***your ways my ways****, declares the* LORD*. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are* ***my ways higher*** *than your ways and* ***my thoughts than*** *your thoughts"*

We have said as a church that this reality, though hard to grapple with because it goes *against* our sinful makeup, is **exceptionally positive news**! It means that God is not only different from us, but He's categorically different, so that He does NOT have to answer us nor prove anything to us. We are fallible, which means by definition we CANNOT see clearly, since our lens will always be shaded toward self. We cannot wipe our thoughts clear to see how EVERYTHING works together, and we have no capacity to work everything out for good. We will not, nor cannot, understand everything about God, and if we could, it would **make US God, which would be bad news for everyone.** God HAS given us enough about Himself to know Him through Jesus Christ, and to believe and trust Him.

When He acts and works in *surprising ways*, it is only surprising to us! When He chooses the least likely to accomplish His purposes: *a man who was slow of speech and heavy tongue to be His mouthpiece in* ***Moses*** (Ex. 4:10), *a Canaanite prostitute who would save the spies and become part of Jesus' lineage in* ***Rahab*** *(*Joshua 2; Matt. 1:5); *a young, teenage virgin to be the mother of Jesus* in ***Mary*** (Luke 1:34-38);

[1] A.W. Tozer, The Knowledge of the Holy (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 1.

[2] C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" (1941)

and *a brash, uneducated fisherman to feed His sheep and die a martyr's death **in Peter*** (John 21:15-19). Not to mention turning evil into good (Gen. 50:20), using suffering and groaning for our good (Rom. 8:17), and choosing the least of society and culture to be His own and reach the world (1 Cor. 1:26-31). This same God was willing to have His Own Son enter Jerusalem as King, heralded on a Sunday and put on a cross Friday, so that God could forgive those very enemies who put Him to death (Rom. 5:8).

Why do we start this way? Our understanding, trust, and rest in God's ways and work is going to be challenged (even more than it already has in Romans 8) as we wrestle with questions about God's goodness, sovereignty, and ability to keep His promises. We move from the beauty of God securing our salvation in Christ to the question about the people of Israel and the rejection of so many currently in regards to salvation in Jesus. Romans 9-11 is a challenge for sure. Some have skipped the section all together and believe that the end of chapter 8 dovetails nicely with the beginning of chapter 12 (which it does). But in reality, chapters 9-11 are merely an extension of Paul's treatise on the **righteousness of God** and how that extends to mankind throughout history, past, present, and into the future.

Now, we've covered some of this ground already. In Romans 3, we looked at the fact that **both Jews and Gentiles** (all non-Jews) are under the power of sin, with one group possessing the law and circumcision, the other the law of conscience, but BOTH indicted the same way. Romans 3:21-4:25 showed that the saving **righteousness of God** is for BOTH as well, and that the conduit of that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone. Then we looked in chapter 8 at the fact that in the gospel of Jesus Christ, those who believe have blessings that were known only by Israel in the OT: *we have been adopted, a future of promised inheritance, righteousness, we are foreknown, predestined, and called, and are assured of a future glorification.* There are undoubted questions, then, about the past, present, and future of Israel (aka the **Jews** in Paul's language) that must be addressed in order to see God as faithful and as a promise keeper.

Asking questions of hard concepts is not only normal for anyone who studies the Bible, it is encouraged! These concepts are difficult, and asking questions of the text helps us make sense of it in order to see God's perfect hand in it. **Thomas Schreiner**, a modern Biblical scholar, skillfully lays out the issues that hang in our minds after Romans 8 concerning Israel:

> *"If Jews and Gentiles are both equally indicted in sin and have equal access to salvation through Christ, and if the blessings of the OT people of God are in the possession of the church (i.e. righteousness, reconciliation, sonship, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the ability to keep the law, the promise of future salvation, **then what does one make of the OT promises made to Israel!"**[3]*

This breeds questions like: *Have the promises to Israel simply been transferred to the church, and is national Israel left outside? If God's promises to Israel did not come to pass, then how can we be sure the promises made to us will come to pass?* These questions have been discussed, wrestled over, divided over, and argued about for centuries. In fact, my parents are here this morning and where we will end up on some of these conclusions will be different from how I was raised! But what I also want you to see in the text is how **Paul asks questions that we naturally have had as well in regards to the fact that God's chosen people of Israel have largely turned their back on the Messiah Jesus currently.** If that is the case, Paul asks these questions:

- *Has the Word of God failed?* (9:6a)
- *Is God unjust in His Sovereign choices? (9:14)* – particularly in regards to Esau and Jacob

[3] Thomas Schreiner, "Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament", p. 461

- *Why does God still find fault if, like Pharaoh, God hardens their heart* --- or does not open their heart (9:19)
- *What shall we say then? How did a group of Gentiles who DID NOT PURSUE righteousness attain it, and Israel pursued a law to reach righteousness did NOT ATTAIN it?*
- *Has God rejected His people Israel (11:1)*
- *Did Israel fail beyond recovery?* (11:11)

Have you asked any of those questions? For some of you, you never did but NOW DO! We will see that God keeps every one of His promises, can be trusted implicitly, and will fulfill them to the nation or people of Israel. During Paul's day until now there has been a **remnant** who believe by faith (11:4), but a **partial hardening** (11:25) has come upon Israel so that we Gentiles could be grafted in (11:19), but there is a day coming that **all Israel will be saved** (11:26). Getting to the end of this section, Paul simply stands back in amazement at the work and mind of God:

Romans 11:33-36 "*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

*34 "**For who has known the mind of the Lord**,*
or who has been his counselor?"
35 "Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"

36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

These things are given to us to worship the splendor and majesty of God and all His ways! This is NOT dependent on us understanding every part perfectly, but growing in our trust in His keeping His perfect promises.

Now let's go back to the beginning of chapter 9 and see Paul's heart regarding his own people, the Jews, and his willingness to reach them with the gospel despite their hatred of him personally.

Paul's Compassion for his own People (9:1-3)

*I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; **my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit**—2 that I have **great sorrow and unceasing anguish** in my heart. 3 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*

To understand and study the writings of Paul means we must understand the man. Paul was a complex character. He was driven, passionate, direct, and willing to both have the hard conversation and die for the sake of the gospel. He experienced rejection, loss, pain, beatings, hunger, and stoning at the hand of those who opposed him, and distrust from those inside of the church. He did not always heed the counsel of wise people around him (Acts 21:7-14), and was willing to separate from Barnabas, even though Barnabas had been his biggest advocate and helper (Acts 9:26-29; 15:36-41). He was a man who lived out the truth to the fullest, trusting the Sovereign plan of God, even when it meant being imprisoned alone and facing imminent death.

Though his writings to the churches could be harsh (Gal. 3:1, 5:12) and sarcastic (1 Cor. 4:8, 13), no one should have doubted his sincerity or love that he had for people (though they did). He treated the Thessalonian church as both mother and father (1 Thess. 2:7, 11), and served with the elders in Ephesus

with humility and tears (Acts 20:19). Paul's agenda was to fulfill the mission that was given to him by Jesus Himself: "*But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a **chosen instrument** of mine **to carry my name** before the **Gentiles** and **kings** and the **children of Israel**. 16 For I will show him how much he must **suffer** for the **sake of my name**."* (Acts 9:15). This commission gave Paul a singular focus: *to preach the gospel in its fullness to all peoples, but especially to his own people Israel, and it would require a great deal of suffering.*

So when we look back at what Paul says in Romans 9:1-3, we see a man who deeply loves people, and though It is not directly stated, his heart has compassion on **his countrymen, the Jewish nation of Israel.** He had full trust in God's promises, but was torn by the rejection and unbelief of those he loved dearly. This is an intensely personal and intimate section of Scripture. Notice in verse 1 he calls on **three witnesses to his sorrow:**

Christ ---- His own conscience ----- the direction of the Holy Spirit

Paul did not play games, and invoking two parts of the Godhead to prove what you're saying is the highest form of guarantee, since Paul knew that God knows not only the actions but thoughts and intentions of our heart (1 Cor. 4:5). It is true that **our conscience** alone is not a good enough claim, since our consciences can be seared (1 Tim. 4:2). But when he paired his conscience with being "*in the Holy Spirit",* he is calling on the Spirit to validate his claim. ***What was his claim?***

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

Now, if not for his first statement, this could easily be chalked up to over-exaggeration, one of those emotional statements we make in the moment but don't really mean ("*I'd walk over broken glass to get to you").* But here, Paul is saying something **hypothetical but sincere,** and known ***impossibility yet a weighty desire.*** To be "**accursed"** would mean to become a curse, or devoted to destruction in Hell. Paul knew this was impossible since he wrote to the Galatian church that "***Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law <u>by becoming a curse for us"</u>*** (Gal. 3:13). Only Christ could do what Paul stated. But this is similar to what Moses offered in **Exodus 32:32** when he asked God to forgive the people of Israel, and if not, to blot out HIS name, to which God obviously refused. But the *point here* is the depth of love and compassion Paul had for his own countrymen. It is the heart of a parent with a wayward child that at some point wishes God would allow us to trade places so that they could live.

What makes this claim and bent remarkable is Paul's interaction with those that he was willing to give up his own life. Time will not allow it to develop fully, but a survey of **Acts 9** to the end of the chapter captures how the **unbelieving Jews hated Paul with a passion.** Right after his dramatic conversion, Paul went to **Damascus**, *confounding the Jews and proving that Jesus was the Christ,* which lead them to plot to kill him (Acts 9:21-23). In **Pisidian Antioch,** the Jews were **jealous** about the crowds Paul was gathering, so they publicly reviled and contradicted him. So he turned to the Gentiles in the city, who received the gospel by rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord. This incited the Jews of the city, who stirred people up to **persecute Paul and Barnabas** (Acts 13:44-51). When Paul saw a great number of Jews and Greeks believe in Lystra, the unbelieving Jews stirred up the crowd and poisoned their minds. Even though Paul did miracles like healing a lame man (to which people claimed him to be Hermes and Barnabas Zeus), the Jews **from Antioch came to Lystra** to stir up the crowd and **stoned Paul, leaving him for dead.** (Acts 14:1-20)

In Thessalonica the Jews were jealous and ran him out of town, so he went to Berea, but the Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea to run him out of there! (Acts 17:1-3). In Corinth, he was **reviled, slandered, and defamed,** but God promised protection so he stayed 18 months (Acts 18:5-17). In **Ephesus**, there was stubborn unbelief which spoke evil of the Way, pushing Paul out of the synagogue and into the Hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8-9). After a riot and uproar in Ephesus, Paul went back to Corinth, which is where he wrote the **book of Romans** (Acts 20:3), which followed closely behind a plot by the Jews to kill him, which changed his travel plans.

Why is this important context? Because Paul bent over backwards to communicate that he **loved his countrymen, had NOT abandoned them, and both desired and worked to see them come to saving faith in the gospel.** This is how he began each chapter:

Romans 10:1 "*Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that* ***they may be saved****."*

Romans 11:1 "*I ask, then,* ***has God rejected his people****? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin."*

Paul was living proof that God had NOT rejected his people. Here are a couple of takeaways from this part of Paul's life and teaching:

- ***Paul knew that in order to love his countrymen in the gospel meant it would include* <u>suffering</u> *and* <u>persecution</u>** (Acts 21:13) – Reaching the lost and declaring God's glory among the nations comes at a cost (Ps. 96:3). Often we want the results of evangelism and discipleship without the pesky pain that goes along with it. We laud Paul for what God did through him, but can gloss over the abject suffering that he had to endure. This is especially true if we want to reach our countrymen, the people God has brought in our midst. It will cost us to reach those who believe differently than we do **politically, or morally, or every other way.** Paul showed that those who were his enemy were NOT to be rejected or cancelled, but responded with compassion and love, even willing to give up his own life and eternal soul for those who persecuted him.

- ***God's saving promises of election did NOT hinder his evangelistic fervor, but fueled it* –** No one, and I mean no one, matched the evangelistic and missional fervor of Paul, and no one taught as extensively about the sovereignty of God in salvation, including His electing purposes. BECAUSE he knew God keeps his promises, he continued to aggressively teach, proclaim, reason, explain, and prove that it was necessary for Christ to suffer, die, and rise again.

Evangelism and discipleship has changed over the decades in our culture as fewer and fewer people have a pre-suppositional knowledge of God and Scripture. That means it takes many hours of personal time to converse, explain, and understand Scripture with someone. It also seems that a challenge everyone in this church faces (myself included) is this: the longer we've walked as believers, involving ourselves in the church, raising our families, and serving each other, our **fervor and interaction with unbelievers wanes.** I've loved watching Brayton come to faith and immediately share the gospel with his friends and co-workers. It's delightful to watch Emma and Dennis sharing what they've learned from Scripture and what they know so far with co-workers and bosses, sometimes simply by reading their Bible at work.

Paul's call of preaching and suffering is no different than the call we each have received by Jesus, to **make disciples** of all nations. This is enlivened NOT by techniques or better practices, and not only by our view of God, but by **God's view of us.** He calls us to proclaim the good news, since how will people

call on the name of the Lord they've never believed or believe on Him they've never heard? How will they hear without someone telling them, and how will we tell unless we are sent? We believe God saves everyone who calls on the name of the Lord, both **Jew and Gentile,** *will be saved!* (Romans 10:11-14).

So I leave you with two questions: *what do you think about when you think about God, and what does God think about us?*

Israel's Rejection Despite Privileges (9:4-5)

*They are **Israelites**, and to them belong the **adoption**, the **glory**, the **covenants**, the **giving of the law**, the **worship**, and the **promises**. 5 To them belong the **patriarchs**, and from their race, according to the flesh, **is the Christ**, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.*