

“I Could Wish Myself Accursed”

In the name of Jesus Christ, who is God over all and blessed forever, dear friends: Today's Epistle lesson is from St. Paul's letter to the Christian Church at Rome, which is his magna opus on the Gospel. In this letter he carefully explains step by step God's plan to save fallen man by the person and work of Jesus Christ, his Son. Therefore in order to understand the text before us today, which marks a sharp turn in the Apostle's line of argument, it will be helpful to do a quick review of the ground he's covered up to this point. So here goes:

In the first two and a half chapters, Paul shows how all people are accused by God's Holy Law and stand before him condemned and without excuse. This is true for both the Jew who has God's Law handed down by Moses and for pagan Gentiles who have never heard God's commandments because at very least they have God's Law written on their hearts in the form of conscience. So, it doesn't make any difference. Before God all sinners and are justly condemned. Paul further shows that there is no human way out of this, that there is nothing we can possibly think or do to work our own salvation. On our own, the situation is completely hopeless.

But then toward the end of the third chapter, Paul reveals that the Lord has prepared another way that we can stand before the Lord in judgment and be declared righteous in his sight. It's a righteousness that comes not by doing but rather by believing. And here Paul puts forth the very heart of the Gospel: how in love God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to be the Savior of the world; how he, Christ, though eternal God, took on human flesh, lived a perfect life of obedience to the Law, and yet nevertheless was condemned, suffered, and died as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world, and how he rose again from the dead on the third day as living proof that his work of atonement is complete. This is the righteousness of God, Paul declares, which the Lord imputes to all who trust in Jesus and what he has done to work salvation for us. Jesus does it all. He keeps God's Holy Law for us: both the part that said in order to live be perfectly righteous and the part that said the soul that sins must die.

Okay, in the fourth chapter of Romans, Paul continues to build and expand the argument, demonstrating from the Old Testament that this plan of God to save us by faith in Christ is not something new: it's what the Scriptures have been saying all along. He holds up Abraham, the father of the faithful, as the chief example. The Lord counted him righteous not because of what he did, but rather because he trusted the Word and Promises of God pointing to the Savior. He was saved by trusting in Christ and his death and resurrection just like we are.

In the fifth chapter, Paul explains what this means for us: that the futile effort and constant fear connected to trying to please God by our own worthless efforts is over. Through Christ we have peace with God. Chapter six opens with Baptism and how it ties us directly to Jesus in his passion, death, and resurrection. Paul explains how that when Jesus died, in Baptism we die with him. And because Christ is raised, we are also raised with him to live a new life. Freed from the slavery of sin and curse of the Law and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can now live as God's children, walking in joyful obedience.

Ah, but the struggle with sin isn't over. In fact, it's just beginning, as Paul explains in chapter seven. There he describes the ongoing battle between the two natures in us: the old, evil nature that inclines our thoughts and actions toward sin, and the new, redeemed nature that

desires to do God's will. Paul speaks of the wretched frustration of wanting to do good but having every intent and action contaminated by the evil within him. He yearns to be freed from this struggle – and he looks to Christ to ultimately deliver him.

And Christ will. This is what Paul describes in chapter eight, how in Jesus the final victory is guaranteed for the faithful. We need not waver or fear no matter what the enemy throws at us. In all things that happen God is working for our good, and there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

With all that, we arrive at chapter nine, where, as I stated before, Paul's presentation abruptly changes course. It's as if he's anticipating a question – one that goes something like this: Okay, Paul, we've been following your discussion and we see how this Gospel of Christ all hangs together. We think it's wonderful; but what about the Jews? What's the deal with them?

You see, the Christian Church in Rome would have been composed mostly of Gentiles, that is, people with other than Jewish backgrounds. They weren't physical descendants of Israel. A few of them might have been proselytes to the Jewish faith, Gentiles who believed in the True God and worshipped with the Jews; but the vast majority would have been idol worshipping pagans before they heard the Gospel and became believers in Jesus. It's likely that were there also a very small number of people with Jewish backgrounds among the believers at Rome. But everyone would have seen that these poor folks were in a very difficult situation.

That's because in the early days the Jews – the majority of them, anyway – were the fiercest opponents of Christianity. They hated Jesus. They hated Paul and the other Apostles for preaching about him. They really hated that Paul and the others were saying that in Christ both Jew and Gentile are alike – that there's no distinction. But they especially hated it when a Jew – one of their own race – was converted to Christ and confessed the name of Jesus as Savior. Such a person would have been disowned by their family and friends and treated with utter contempt.

So, all the Christians at Rome know that the Jews are our enemies. They despise us. They lie about us, spreading horrible rumors about our worship and practices. They're always trying to get us arrested with false accusations. And if one of them joins us, he's immediately cut off. But here's what doesn't make sense. They're God's chosen race. They're the ones God made the heirs of his promises, the ones upon whom he placed his special love and favor. So, if nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, what happened to them? Why is it now – it seems anyway – that they've been rejected?

The answer to this anticipated question is what Paul takes up for the next three chapters of Romans. Relax: we won't get to it all today. Our text is only the first five verses of Paul's reply. But what he says as he opens this discussion is worthy of our attention.

Paul begins by expressing his overwhelming sorrow concerning the members of his own race who are stubbornly rejecting the Gospel. He stresses that he is being absolutely truthful, bearing witness by the Holy Spirit when he says that he is suffering great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart on their behalf. This is saying a lot. After all, Paul himself has suffered greatly because of them. Due to their lies and constant attacks he's been threatened, beaten, imprisoned, and nearly torn limb from limb. But he's not holding any grudges. He loves his countrymen. And what he wants is their salvation.

And to achieve that he would be willing to do or suffer anything. *Anything*. He goes so far as to say, “For the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh, I could wish myself accursed and cut off from Christ.” Think about that. What he’s saying is that if it would bring them to the truth of the Gospel and result in their salvation, he would be willing to offer himself to spend all of eternity in the flames of hell.

Let me ask you: is there anyone or any group of people you could say that about? That in order to save them – if that’s what it took – you would be willing to go to hell for them? Forever is a very long time. I’m guessing that even if you said yes and meant it, after twenty or thirty thousand years of burning, you might think, “Boy, that was really a dumb choice.” I know I’d be thinking that in the first two seconds.

In view of this, we might be inclined to dismiss this statement of the Apostle as mere hyperbole – a deliberate exaggeration to emphasize his concern for his people. But that would be a mistake. That’s apparent from the oath formula he uses leading into the statement: “I am telling the truth in Christ.” Paul doesn’t use that kind of language lightly. When he says something like that, you can be sure he means it. Let that settle in. Paul means that he *would* go to hell forever to save his fellow Jews. He would prefer to be cursed by God and cut off from the Savior he loves, if that would save them.

Friends, if you have ever wondered what Christian maturity looks like, this is it. This is what it means to have the mind of Christ – to love someone or some group of people so completely and thoroughly that you would give yourself to damnation for their sake. How do I know? It’s because it’s what Jesus did. He gave himself to infinite torment on the cross. He could do that because he is at once true man and true God. What the humanity in Jesus suffered, the divinity also suffered. That’s what makes the suffering and death of Jesus able to atone for the sins of the whole world. His suffering on the cross is more than and outweighs the suffering of all humankind in hell forever.

Jesus gave himself for us in love, and now Paul, transformed and made Christ-like by that redeeming love, would be willing to suffer the same – at least as much is humanly possible – to save his fellow Jews.

Of course, Paul knows it’s not possible. His going to hell could not save anyone. More to the point, it’s not necessary. Paul knows that Christ was already cursed for all people. This is the Good News Paul proclaimed; the Good News that for the most part, his countrymen rejected.

But why? What is it about the Gospel the Jews in his day found so hard to receive? It was the very fact that Jesus *had to be cursed for them*. In rejecting the truth, what they were really rejecting was the very idea that they needed someone – anyone – to be cursed for them. Salvation was something they thought they could achieve on their own. They didn’t want help. They didn’t want a Savior. That insulted them. They wanted to save themselves. They thought they could be righteous and stand in the judgment on their own merit. The very idea of what Paul said he’d be willing to offer on their behalf was what they couldn’t accept.

The same is true today, and not just by those who follow the faith of Judaism. This is what’s behind Islam and many other false faith systems. Oddly enough, it’s even the driving force behind a lot of what’s being called the new atheism. The other day I was reading a long argument on the internet between one such self-proclaimed atheist and several Christians who were attempting to share Christ with her. The thing is, the woman understood the Gospel (for

the most part). She actually had a better knowledge of the Bible than many of those who were supposedly on “our” side. What she rejected was the idea that there was a God out there who would come up with such a plan to save the world. If she were God, she was sure she’d have done it another way. Thus, although she would never admit it, she was claiming to be wiser, more caring, and more loving than God himself. She didn’t want a Savior. If there were a God, she thought, surely he’d have come up with a plan that allowed people to save themselves. But that God doesn’t exist, so she rejects the God who does exist.

Returning to our text, we’ve seen that there was no way for Paul to be cursed by God in order to save his people, nor was it necessary. But in his tireless efforts to save his fellow Jews, he was cursed *by them*. He was reviled, treated contemptuously, and physically harmed in many ways by them as they tried to silence and discredit him. And we know that some of them saw in him the evidence of Christ’s sacrificial love as he continued to return kindness for their evil, as he continued to pray for them and for their forgiveness even as they attacked him, and as he continued to trust in Christ despite all the hardships they inflicted upon him. Surely that made a powerful impression upon them. And I’m willing to bet that opened at least some of them to seeing the evil in themselves, and to hearing what he had to say about Jesus and God’s forgiveness through faith in him. In this sense, maybe Paul’s being cursed did help save some of his people.

This is God’s desire for all people: to save them by his grace through faith in Jesus. Therefore may God give to us the mind and love of Christ that we too might share St. Paul’s willingness to suffer any disgrace or indignity in order to witness to the truth of salvation to save those who are as yet the enemies of Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!