

Transformed by Anguish Over the Lost

Spring Sermon Series on Romans

Romans 9:1-33

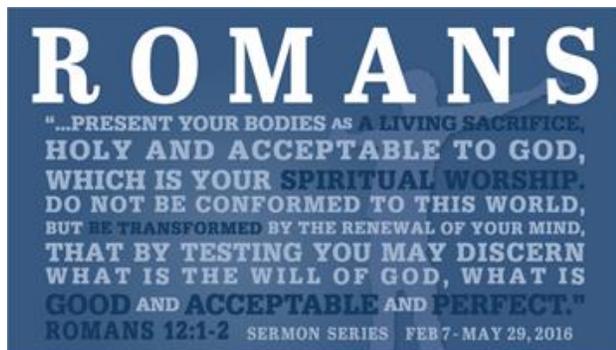
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

April 10, 2016

TEXT: Romans 9:1-33

We continue this morning in our spring series on Paul's letter to the Romans. We have been reading Romans this spring and asking the question of how are we transformed by the gospel.



Paul's letter is written to explain the gospel and to transform and change us even as we listen. As we have journeyed this spring, we have seen that God's wrath is rightly against humanity, and that He has acted in Christ to cause our sins to be forgiven. Justification by faith in Romans 3 then starts to unfold these tremendous blessings and benefits of being in

Christ, that we get a new family in Romans 4, a new heritage in Romans 5. We get new life in Jesus Christ in Romans 6 and 7, and as pastor Scott shared last week, we get a new heart and a new spirit within us as a result of trusting in Christ. Romans 8 ends with such a glorious ending—one of the emotional high points of the New Testament—of “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” Nothing can separate us, we are told, and there is great joy and triumph at the end of Romans 8. The question for many of us is: “Why not just end the letter right there? I have all the blessings. I have trusted Christ. Hallelujah! my sins are forgiven. I have a new heritage. I have a new life. I have a new spirit. Amen!” and just leave the building. Yet, that would be a deep misunderstanding of Paul's ministry and of the letter of Romans, because the blessings that we have received in Jesus Christ through faith in Him are blessings that are meant to be shared. God's mission in the world continues. So Paul begins in Romans 9 with a dramatic shift from the joy at the end of chapter 8 to sharing with us the depth of anguish that he feels. The transformation that we are invited into from Romans 9 is a transformation not of the mysteries of God's will and His working in the world, but a transformation of anguish over the lost. These are not the lost far, far away, but for Paul these are the lost close at hand. These are the people in our own families, in our own community, the people that we know and love the best. The triumphant joy at the end of chapter 8 is met with a depth of sorrow, but this depth of sorrow then causes Paul, and us in hearing him this morning, to search the Scriptures and to discover the outworking of God's plan. Romans 9,10, and 11 really go together, and the

sorrowful note that is announced at the beginning of Romans 9 resolves after 90 verses with an outburst of praise, and joy, and confidence in God's sovereign mercy in the world. So Paul does not remain in this sorrow, but we don't understand the gospel if we don't allow the Word of Christ to pierce our hearts specifically with the longing to reach those close at hand.

Let's look together at Romans 9. It is a deep and moving passage. In the first five verses, Paul shares his sorrow, and in verse six, he begins to discuss and unfold God's working in the world and shows us that His mercy is sovereign and powerful. In Romans 9:1, he stacks a series of expressions. He says:

*"I am speaking the truth in Christ -
I am not lying;
my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—"*

Notice the expression is that his conscience bears witness within him *in the Holy Spirit*. This is vital to notice because you on your own will not care. You won't give a rip about the eternal state of the people around you in your own humanity, but part of the evident power of the Holy Spirit in our lives is that the Holy Spirit moves in us, and the Holy Spirit, who is mentioned 19 times in Romans 8, then works in us to cause us to care about the salvation of the people around us. One of the ways you can know that you are filled with the Holy Spirit is if you long for the salvation of those nearby. Paul says my conscience is *in step* with the Holy Spirit of God. What is this sorrow he mentions in Romans 9:2? He says:

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

This sorrow is identified in Romans 9:3, and Paul strains the limits of language when he says:

"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."

This is like the prayer of Moses in Exodus 32:32 when Moses says:

"But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."

Paul uses the language of the covenant curse. He says: "If it were possible, Lord, condemn me to hell if that would make more room for my kinsmen." This is a depth of longing for salvation for someone that you love, a longing that few of us have known. Have you ever felt the prayer rise up in your heart to say, "Oh, Lord, just take my place out so that they could come in"? "If there's room for only one more, then I want to give up my seat for the salvation of my family members." Have you known this depth of sorrow, this longing? It seems almost irreverent for a moment, and yet it is the deep river of prayer, a longing for salvation of those close at hand. "Oh, Lord, if there was any way." It is like the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: "If

there is any other way, Lord, do it.” Paul is offering his own life, as it were, for his kinsman. He knows them, and he loves them. His love for the people close by him is evident in this torrent of blessings, a knowledge of who they are. He says in Romans 9:4-5:

“They are the Israelites; they are my kinsmen, my brothers. They have adoption, the glory, the Covenants, the giving of the law. They have the very Word of God. They been entrusted with the worship of the living God, and they bear the promises of God's work in the world. They have the heritage. They have the patriarchs, and it is from their line that the Savior of the world has come, who is blessed above all.

It so important for us to remember when we think of Paul as the missionary to the nations that he never stopped trying to reach his own people. He never stopped doing this. Even at the end of his life, when he finally arrived in Rome as a prisoner, he showed up in the largest city of the world and he said: “I am wearing these chains for the hope of Israel, and the first meeting that I want to have is with the Jewish community of Rome. I want to explain to them that I'm wearing these chains because God fulfilled the promise He made to our fathers. That is why I am here.” And he said: “I have done nothing against our people. I am here only to tell you that God did what He said He would do, and He calls you to point your trust in His One and only Son.” He never stopped. Have you stopped trying to reach the people close to you? Have you given up on trying to reach your family? Have you given up trying to reach your nation, your subgroup? Paul never did. He affirms the great gifts that God had given. He says like in Romans 3:2 that they were entrusted with the very Words of God; they were adopted as God's son, in Exodus 4:22. They had experienced the glory on Mount Sinai and the crossing of the Sea. They had been made God's Covenant partner. They had been entrusted with the worship of the Tabernacle and Temple. Israel held in trust the storyline of redemption, the promise of the Messiah. He knows these benefits, and what he longs for them to see is that these things have come true for their sake and for the rest of the world.

He wants us to know, beginning in Romans 9:6, that as he looks into Scripture, it is not the case that God's Word has run aground. The ESV says:

“But it is not as though the word of God has failed.”

The term that he uses here is a nautical term. It's a term for a ship that is coming across the sea and strikes a sandbar, and it is stuck in the sandbar. Sometimes when we look around and we see people that we love and long for and desire them to know and receive Christ and nothing is happening, sometimes we think that God's purpose in the world is just stuck, that it stopped, that it is not moving forward. I have prayed for members of my family for 20 years, and at times in that journey, I wondered: “God is Your purpose working out? It seems stalled. It seems stuck.” He wants to assure us from Scripture that this is not the case. Hallelujah! God's redemptive purpose in the world has been moving; it is on the move; it is not stuck in the sand.

It's moving. It's dynamic. It's ongoing. It's been going since the call of Abraham. It's been moving in the world, and by His sovereign mercy, God has been calling and drawing people to Himself right from the beginning.

Paul begins to retell the story of the Scripture, and in so doing he wants to guard us against two very different but opposite mistakes. Some of us believe that this whole discussion of salvation is irrelevant because God is such a nice God that He is going to save everyone in the end. You can write books like Rob Bell's recent book *Love Wins*. God wins and everyone is saved in the end. Let's just watch the game. It makes us passive because we imagine that God just gives salvation regardless because of His generosity. The other version of universalism is that we imagine, as we look at ourselves, come to think of it, all of us are pretty good guys, and if God is going to give salvation, in the end, of course, we all deserve it. There's another opposite error, though, and that opposite mistake of universalism is an extreme particularism that says salvation is just for me and just for people like me, and our eyes are closed to the lavish scale of God's mercy. As the gospel unfolds in Romans 9, we see that it is particular in that it comes only through Christ, and yet it is universal in scope because there are some people from every people group, every nation, that are included.

How does Paul then begin to unfold the Scriptures? He wants us to know that God's purposes, His merciful redemptive plan, has been at work, that none of us can assume salvation as a birth rite. He begins to retell the entire story of Scripture. He speaks of Abraham. God began with the call of Abraham, an idolater from Ur. When God called Abraham as an idolater from Ur, He called him out of His mercy. His plan was that through Abraham all peoples of the earth would be blessed. From the beginning, He said: "I'll call a barren, elderly couple and promise them descendants like the stars, so that everyone will know that it is by My mercy." Abraham tried to make his own plans since he had no children. We can imagine he thought: "Father, this descendants like the stars thing is really running aground." But God said: "No, that's My plan," and by God's mercy, He gives a son. It is so hilarious in Scripture that an elderly couple would have a son that they named their son *Laughter*, Isaac. God's mercy, and Paul stresses right from the beginning that it is not the physical descendants, it is the descendants of promise who receive salvation. No one can presume salvation as a birthright. He says this is true for Abraham; this is true for Isaac. God's promise was that Sarah would have a son by God's grace and the miraculous working in their lives. This is true for Abraham; this is true for Isaac; this is also true for Jacob, whose name is later changed to Israel. Rebecca has two sons in the womb, and the way that people think is that the firstborn is the designated heir. We think in the ways of human beings, and we rank ourselves against one another. But God says: "No, My grace, My mercy, I want to show you that it is by My kindness. No one can presume. No one has a claim on Me. Before the children are even born, I said that the older will serve the younger," and

Jacob does not deserve it—remember that Jacob means *he who grasps the heel*. Jacob, who is a deceiver, Jacob who has spent his whole life trying to grab God's promises, is finally humbled by the Angel of the Lord at the Jabbok and discovers that salvation is by the mercy of God. It is true not only of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is true, Paul argues, even of Israel as a whole. What shall we say," he asks, "is God unjust?" No, He is not unjust. In fact, He is merciful to undeserving people, and Paul says this is the case of Israel as an entire people. Remember the quote of what God says to Moses, Romans 9:15:

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

This is spoken in the shadow of Israel's worship of the golden calf. When Israel as an entire people deserve God's wrath and judgment, God is merciful. That is so unexpected. In Exodus 34:6, God says:

"This is My name. I am the Lord, the Lord, merciful and compassionate."

Paul is pressing in this chapter, retelling the entire story of the Bible, asking us to open our hearts to see that God's mercy wins out and that none of us can presume upon it. That is his conclusion in Romans 9:16:

"So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."

That is his conclusion in Romans 9:18:

"So then He has mercy on whomever He wills. . ."

We strain to follow this argument, saturated in Scripture. What Paul is doing is retelling the entire Bible. He begins then to say to us in Romans 9:21:

"Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?"

A host of questions floods our minds when we hear this as modern people. We ask questions like: Is this fair? Is this right? This seems scary, I don't think I understand this. Again we ask in panic what time does the game start? This is too deep. What should flood our mind this moment is a host of scriptural images, like in Isaiah 64:8:

"Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, You are the potter; we are all the work of Your hand."

God as Creator in Genesis 1 is described in language that makes it sound like He fashions us. This image of a potter fashioning a vessel is a very clear allusion to the word of the Lord that comes to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 18:2:

"Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let You hear My words."

So Jeremiah went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. It is very moving to me to watch a potter's wheel. I have no skill or ability for that and I marvel at it.



There is this whirling wheel and this lump of clay that seems to have no value or purpose, and as that wheel whirls around, a skilled potter dips his hands in water, grabs that lump, squeezes it with just the right amount of pressure, and all of a sudden this vessel just emerges. It's amazing! It is so amazing that I love to watch so much that I actually don't mind the splattering of the clay that hits the shirt and face of those watching. Have you ever seen how when a

potter's wheel is whirling around that sometimes the potter pushes down a vessel that looks good to the untrained eye and turns it back into a lump of clay? That wheel keeps spinning, and all of a sudden the potter grabs again and the vessel is remade and emerges. This is the imagery of Jeremiah 18:4 as the Lord says through Jeremiah:

“And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.”

The vessel was wrecked, it was damaged, it was worthy to be destroyed, and yet the potter reworked it into a new vessel, and as Jeremiah is staring at that vessel being reworked, the word of the Lord comes to him and says in Jeremiah 18:6:

“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.”

If there is a time when a people has become evil and sinful, deserving of God's wrath, the Lord says in Jeremiah 18:7-10:

“If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to My voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.”

Does He not have the power and the right at any time if they repent to remake them? The Lord promises to remake a vessel about to be destroyed, worthy of destruction, and that wheel spins and He remakes it, and it becomes a vessel of mercy.

That is what Paul wants us to see. Romans 9 is not an abstract, philosophical, systematic theology reflection on the doctrine of election. It is not an abstract, philosophical discussion about the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It is the anguishing cry

of a man who longs to see the people he loves believe in Christ and retells the entire story of Scripture to say: “Brothers, salvation is not a birthright. Brothers, salvation is not something any of us deserve. Brothers, salvation is something that comes to those who turn to Christ and receive God's mercy, and God is free, unlike us, and sovereign to give His mercy to all who call on Him.” He invites them to open their minds and hearts in Romans 9:22, and says:

“What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. . .”

He asks them to imagine the possibility that God, desiring to reveal, to indicate his wrath—He is righteous and holy and sees sin in the world, that it is deserving of His judgment—what if this is the case in which He wants to make known His power? What if he wants to show the wrath of His holiness, but He wants to display His power? What if in His divine patience He has endured, He has waited and He has seen vessels ready, prepared, and they are about to be destroyed? What if God waited? What if He has waited right up until the present moment, like in Romans 2:4?

“Or do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?”

What if He is waiting? What if He has not ended the world to give you the chance this very moment to turn and respond? What if His power is displayed in this world lavishly on all who call on His name? What if that is the case? That is the gospel. It is the case that He has waited. He has waited for us to turn. In Romans 9:22-24, and Paul seems to say: “Strain the powers of your imagination to sink deep down into the mystery of His will, that you could know His workings. But what I have done is this: I have desired to show My wrath because of My holiness and vindicate that in the sight of all nations. But I have also desired to show My power, and so I have poured out My wrath on My One and only Son so that My power of mercy would be on display for all who call upon His name.” If you do not call on His name, my brothers whom I long for, then you no longer know Him. Brothers, I want you to open your heart to look across the aisle and see that members of the nations have received Him and called on His name, and God has acted in this way to make known the riches of His glory on these vessels of mercy. Paul is speaking to those who know the Scripture well. He has just retold the whole Bible: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel receiving the law, Israel's disobedience in exile, and citing the passage of Jeremiah where God in His sovereign mercy remakes a people who repent. He says this is the case, not only for us whom He has called, not only for Jews, but also for those of the nations.

He applies the prophetic language of Hosea to all who believe. Hosea 1:2 is a beautiful image of reconciliation and restoration. God told Hosea:

“Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is

guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.”

“I want you to marry a prostitute.” That's a difficult calling. God wanted His people to have a visual picture of their unfaithfulness to Him. Hosea says okay, and he marries a prostitute and they have children. Then the Lord says to His people: “I am going to take you back out into the wilderness where we made covenant before. I am going to take you back out into the wilderness for romance, and I am going to speak tenderly to you, and I am going to call the people I said ‘you're not My people anymore,’ I am going to call you ‘My beloved.’ I am going to call you ‘sons of the Most High.’ Though you have been disobedient and unfaithful, I am going to bring you back.”

The gospel is that the Word of God has not run aground. God's mercy has come to us in Jesus Christ, and it is so overwhelming, it is so available for all who believe. In Romans 9:30-31, Paul presses his kinsmen to look across and say:

“What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.”

How is that possible? This is because the nations have believed in Christ who has come in faithful fulfillment of all God's promises. He says of Israel in Romans 9:32-33 that at this moment:

“They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.’”

The New Testament tells us the rock of offense is Jesus Christ. They stumbled to believe in Him, because to believe in Him means that you have to say that you need forgiveness, just like the rest of the world. As Paul moves further, and we will see this next week in chapter 10, he knows that they are zealous for God but have missed Christ. He knows that this is not a state that will endure, but that some from everywhere will turn. *“Everyone who calls on His name will be saved,”* he will say. He will set this before us in Romans 11 and guard new believers against the pride and arrogance that says you are out in order to make room for me in the family of God. It is not that way. Jesus said: *“In My Father's house are many rooms.”* It is a big house, plenty of room at the table, and when they turn, they will be brought in.

He ends his desire for his kinsman to know Christ lauding the inscrutable, unfathomable mercy of God. Romans 9 is deep water. It is really not intended to be confusing or complicated or abstract. Do you see that? This is the longing of a man who says: “I love you, my family, and don't you see that this is the way God has worked all along? He is merciful to undeserving

sinner like us.”

How does Romans 9 change us? Let me give us three ways that it has changed me this week.

Number one: **What makes you sad?** This is the question I have asked myself this week. What really makes you sad? Are you sad when your favorite show season ends or gets canceled? Are you sad when you don't have the return of affection from somebody you find attractive? Are you sad when you don't get the promotion you deserve? Are you sad at the power of sin in your life? These are things we get sad about, yet Paul says something here that is unlike anything else he says. He says: “What makes me sad is that I long for the people I love to know Jesus Christ.” I would suggest that this is a holy sadness; this is a sadness worth having. It is a holy sadness to say I'm longing for the people I love to know Jesus Christ. That is a sadness we all should have. It is holy one. I remember being in Jamaica Plain in Boston many years ago. I was speaking on the phone with my middle sister who was going through an anguishing time. She didn't know Christ, her life was unraveling, and we were a thousand miles away. She said, “I don't know what to do. I don't know how to turn my life around.” I had been praying for her for years, and I finally said to her, “Lynley, remember when we were kids and we were sick and we didn't know what to do? (Lynley and I had chickenpox and some other illnesses at the same time.) Remember that feeling when we were sick, and Mom and Dad finally said, ‘You are sick and we are going to take you to the hospital’? Do you remember that feeling when we were in the back of the car on the way to the hospital and our spirits lifted because we were going to the place where we could be healed and get well?” I said, “Lynley, that's where you need to go. You need to go to Jesus Christ who can heal your soul. Do you want to just receive Him?” To my great surprise, she said “Yes, yes I do,” and I had the great privilege of leading my own sister to receive Christ. That is what Romans 9 is about.

Number two: We have got to become people who **know the big story of Scripture**. It is stunning how in just a few verses Paul retells the entire Bible. We need the whole Bible, because if you don't know God's story, you will not know God's character, purpose, and identity. This purpose is breathtaking in scope and beautiful in design. His righteousness is displayed, His power and saving mercy. If we don't know the story, we easily become indifferent; we become arrogant and weak on the reality of our sin and need for the cross. So we need to be big readers of the Bible.

Number three: Where does this soul anguish, this knowledge and confidence in God's purpose lead Paul to action? It leads him to action. Look at what Paul says in Romans 10:1:

“Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.”

He translates his longing into **a life of prayer, real prayer**. I am going to ask you to do something I have never done before. I have mixed feelings about my smart phone. It looks cool, sort of.

People have bigger ones, newer ones all the time. It's distracting; it interferes with primary relationships. I find it very difficult to discern a junk email from a phone call from my wife, and so I have mixed feelings about it. But, I downloaded an app this week, and that's really what I want you to do. It's on my front screen, and it's called '8 to 15.'



It is the kind of app that even David Palmer can use, because it has only three things you can do with it. In just 10 seconds you can master this thing. I am already on the nerve center of '8 to 15.' It was developed by a Christian, and it gives you an alert, ABCs to share Christ, and a list of names. It is an app that will invite you to look at the 8 to 15 people that are closest to you and your family. This isn't about global missions right now. It

is about your family and colleagues, 8 to 15 people that God has placed in your life, close by you. You put their names in here, and then you decide when you get a daily alert to pray for them. It is the contacts, the alert, and a simple ABC of how to share Christ. Where does this anguish go for Paul? It goes into a life of prayer and a willingness to share. If we hear that, then we too are changed by Romans 9.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.