

Romans 9:1-5 Does it matter to you whether people come to faith in Christ?

Introduction

In the recent past at our annual Baptist ministers' conference at St Andrews an incident occurred that will remain long in the memory for many of us present that day. Our main speaker that year was a gifted communicator and a prominent figure in the Evangelical world. His success in his work was taken for granted. His skill in explaining God's Word was also clearly in evidence. However, until that day I certainly knew nothing of the person and his family circumstances. He was a fairly serious and intense man but we noted two things at that meeting first he was late missing the opening part of the worship service, but he was in attendance by the time he was due to speak. The second thing was that there had clearly been tears on his face as he was emotional to a degree I had not witnessed before. He explained to us that his son, who was a gifted young man in his late twenties, had phoned him unexpectedly and he felt the need to take the call. Why was this information important? His son roughly a decade earlier had pronounced himself an atheist with no interest in the things of God, a heartbreaking moment for his parents. Ten years later out of the blue he phoned to speak to his dad about Jesus and to say he had been in church the past two Sundays at a good Baptist Church known to the family. His father wept with joy at this wonderful news. He told us a little of the story which I hope and pray by now has a happy ending.

This reflects something of the heart of God for His people when they wander away from His pathway and fail to give Him the place He desires in their lives. The story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 captures God's heart for lost people. The Father in the story represents God the Father and the lost son individuals who have made the foolish choice to leave God out of their lives. Luke 15:17-31 reveals the passion of God to save sinners and the joy He has when one turns to God in repentance from sin and through faith in their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Notice the young man is attracted to return to the Father on his Father's terms. Highlight even more the passion of the Father (Luke 15:20) to see the young man saved. Then what joy the conversion brought to the family or at least to those who had grasped the nature of saving grace! *'When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. **'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.'** ²¹ *The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." ²² *'But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ *'Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."²⁸ *The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"³¹ "My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" (Luke 15:17-31) There will be many of these kinds of stories amongst the people of God. There will be people here today who have relatives who have yet to come to faith who will identify with Paul's heartache. I am fairly certain that the*****

some of Paul's family would have cut him out of their lives when he turned to follow Jesus although his sister and family who lived in Jerusalem seemed to get on well with him (Acts 23:16) and looked out for him. The question I want to ask you and me as Christians is this: For whom are we motivated to pray for their salvation with this degree of earnestness? If the honest answer is currently no-one maybe we need to ask the Lord to give us a burden for spiritually-lost people who need to be found by their Lord and Saviour.

1. The extent of Paul's love for the Jewish People (Romans 9:1-5)

I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit – ²I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, ⁴the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. ⁵Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen (Romans 9:1-5).

(a) The costly nature of Paul's love We need to remind ourselves constantly that the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible are aids to reading the text put in during the last 1,000 years, rather than anything known to the readers of the biblical text at the time. Paul has expressed great joy at the wonder of the Gospel and its ultimate success in the second half of Romans chapter eight. There is nothing in those verses that prepare us for what Paul goes on to say in Romans 9 about his deep anguish of heart for the lack of responsiveness to the good news from within large sections of the Jewish community. The first missionary journeys began in each location with opportunities to present the good news in the synagogues. The nucleus of every emergent Christian congregation came from Jews who acknowledged Jesus as their Messiah together with God-fearing Gentiles who had attended synagogues attracted by the beliefs and practices of the Jews, but who stopped short of adopting the full-measure of Jewish culture and customs. In those initial years it was a revolutionary breaking down of barriers between Jews and Gentiles and the future prospects for the spread of the Gospel seemed very bright indeed. There had always been opposition to face within the church as some of those from stricter Jewish backgrounds, actually like Paul himself, who were insistent that becoming a follower of Jesus meant adopting the full package of Jewish identity as well. In AD 48 at the Council of Jerusalem this matter was worked through as all points of view were aired and the gathered congregation of the mother church together with the guest church leaders discerned that God had directed the pathway that first Peter (Acts 10-11, 15:7-11) and then Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:12) had proclaimed was God's way forward for the Christian Church. James, the senior pastor in Jerusalem, drew proceedings to a conclusion explaining how mission work among Gentiles would be conducted so that expectations of both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus were now clear. The battle for clarity in communicating the Gospel of grace within the Church had been won, but this ensured that the obstacles to reaching the more conservative members of the Jewish community by their Messianic Jewish friends had increased. They increasingly viewed the Jewish followers of Jesus as having given up their Jewish identity and therefore wanted nothing to do with them.

How serious a problem was this? In Acts 17, for example, a proportion of the Jewish community in Thessalonica were exceedingly hostile to the missionaries. *But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the market-place, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: 'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, ⁷and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.' ⁸When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were*

thrown into turmoil. ⁹ Then they put Jason and the others on bail and let them go...¹³ But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. ¹⁴ The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea (Acts 17:5-9, 13-14). In Corinth matters got worse with it appears a higher proportion, probably now a majority of the Jewish community there opposing Paul's message; Yet it was still a mixed picture with some prominent Jews there supportive of Paul including Crispus the synagogue ruler and his family (Acts 18:6-8: ⁶ But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'⁷ Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshipper of God. ⁸ Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptised). The extent and vehemence of the opposition clearly was affecting Paul. It is even possible in his darker moments that he contemplated even giving up his itinerant church-planting work, until he received an assurance from God to continue. Acts 18:9-11 records this highly significant confirmation of his calling. ⁹ One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.' ¹¹ So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. The seriousness of the opposition to Paul was revealed on his next visit to Jerusalem where all kinds of false charges were made against him. Worst of all was a planned assassination attempt. Acts 23:12-15 gives the details: *The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.* ¹³ More than forty men were involved in this plot. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, 'We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul.' ¹⁵ Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here.' The attempt failed, but Paul lost his liberty as the Romans took him into protective custody at Caesarea, but years would pass before he regained his liberty for a short time before a second imprisonment under Nero and then execution in Rome, probably around a decade after writing this letter. The apostle had expected hostility from unbelievers, but had high hopes of seeing the majority of his fellow Jews recognise Jesus as their Messiah. As we know from church history Paul's work stood the test of time, but he and co-workers had to endure great hardships to accomplish their goals. It is a reminder to us that fulfilling the calling entrusted to us by God will include overcoming discouragements and challenges from unexpected people and places, but as we go forward with Him our obedience to our calling will be vindicated by the Lord.

(b) **The costly depth of Paul's love** (Romans 9:3) *I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit – ² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel...* We must though recognise the depth of both calling and anguish in Paul's heart over the plight of his fellow Jews. Notice the language used in verse three. For the sake of his fellow Jews –if it were possible and of course it is not- he would be willing to be lost eternally if that meant the salvation of those who were currently opposed to the gospel he proclaimed. We must note that the apostle has made it abundantly clear that the ultimate triumph of the Gospel is assured (Romans 8:28-30). The remaining verses of that chapter are a celebration of the implications of that fact. However, the depth of his commitment for mission and outreach he conducted overflows from his passion to see people come to faith, especially his fellow Jews. It hurts him deeply, for example, that there are people who have not had an opportunity to hear a clear presentation of the Gospel, a subject he will address in Romans chapter ten. Here was a man who combined a clear commitment to the sovereignty of God in the salvation of His people

with an equally passionate pledge to do everything in his power to evangelise amongst the people and places of the Roman Empire. The sovereignty of God was an anchor in the storms he faced as he pressed on with the work of mission. I suggest that it ought to be the same for us in our generation.

2. Examples of earnest intercession of people for their nation

Paul was not unique in having a heart for his nation to stay close to the Lord or to come to a genuine faith in Him. There are other examples in the Bible to illustrate this point. I will mention two examples Moses and Daniel who interceded for their people in very difficult times.

(a) Moses over Israel on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32) It is my conviction, though I cannot prove it, that Paul's words here and the sentiments behind them is an echo of Moses' prayers to God for Israel at Mount Sinai after their sin with the Golden Calf. The Israelites had come out of Egypt with great joy as the supernatural deliverance of God had extricated them from the clutches of the regional superpower of that day. Moses had spent some time talking with God as he received the Ten Commandments and it appears that Aaron who had been left in charge in Moses' absence, gave into pressure to make an image to represent the invisible God of Israel. God informed Moses of the tragedy unfolding in the camps of Israel and even suggested to Moses that He might begin again with Moses and his family (like Noah and his family after the flood?) and destroy those who had been unfaithful. How did Moses react? Exodus 32:11-14 gives his initial response: *But Moses sought the favour of the Lord his God. 'Lord,' he said, 'why should Your anger burn against Your people, whom You brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that He brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth"? Turn from Your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on Your people. ¹³ Remember Your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom You swore by your own self: "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance for ever."¹⁴ Then the Lord relented and did not bring on His people the disaster He had threatened.* The heart of Moses' argument here is that God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants for ever to be their God and they His people (Genesis 17:7-8: *I will establish My covenant as an **everlasting** covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸ The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an **everlasting** possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.* God, Moses says, human beings don't follow through with their promises sometimes but You are utterly trustworthy and keep the promises You have made. I ask you to keep Your pledge to Israel despite their sinfulness and unbelief. Pleading the promises of God in prayer to God is powerful because it is taking God at His Word and asking Him to honour it (albeit in His way and in His time). In addition, Moses says, unbelievers (Egyptians) will say that You either failed to do what You planned or had malevolent intentions in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. For the honour of Your name please forgive Israel its sins. Notice also how many times Moses refers to Israel as *Your people* in this prayer.

Moses then goes down the mountain addresses the problem and then returns to pray for the people. Prayer then and now is not a substitute for service or action when it is required. It is a 'both and' not an 'either or' responsibility for God's people in every generation. Exodus 32:30-34 records the next intercessory encounter with God. *The next day Moses said to the people, 'You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.'³¹ So Moses went back to the Lord and said, 'Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. ³² But now, please forgive their*

sin – **but if not, then blot me out of the book You have written.**’³³The Lord replied to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against Me I will blot out of My book.’³⁴ Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of and My angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for Me to punish, I will punish them for their sin.’ Here is the most powerful plea from Moses’ heart, but he cannot redeem his nation. One day a Saviour will come whose sacrifice for sinners would be an acceptable one to God, but God hears the cry of His servant Moses and heeds his request, although the people responsible for leading the nation astray would still be called to account. Galatians 4:4-5 reminds us of what God had planned for the future. *But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,*⁵ *to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.* Praise God for His plans and the timing of them.

(b) **Daniel over the exiled Jewish People** (Daniel 9) In a very different social context, that of exile from the land of Israel in Iraq, a devout Jew called Daniel is acutely aware of both the character of God and the failings of his nation as he prays for them. These are some of the words of his prayer: *I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: ‘Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and keep His commandments,*⁵ *we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws... ‘Now, Lord our God, who brought **Your** people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for **Yourself** a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong.*¹⁶ *Lord, in keeping with all **Your** righteous acts, turn away **Your** anger and **Your** wrath from Jerusalem, **Your** city, **Your** holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors have made Jerusalem and **Your** people an object of scorn to all those around us.*¹⁷ *‘Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of **Your** servant. For **Your** sake, Lord, look with favour on **Your** desolate sanctuary.*¹⁸ *Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears **Your** Name. We do not make requests of You because we are righteous, but because of **Your** great mercy.*¹⁹ *Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because **Your** city and **Your** people bear your Name’* (Daniel 9:4-5, 15-19). Notice the emphasis on God’s character and reputation, together with His covenant people and the place He had promised to establish this nation. Daniel openly admits that their sinfulness and unfaithfulness could result in the forfeiture of the promises but dares to suggest that greater honour would be given to God if He acted in mercy and forgave them –assuming they turned back to Him *We do not make requests of You because we are righteous, but because of **Your** great mercy* (Daniel 9:18b). Here we have a pointer for our prayers for our nation. We must never forget that we have sinned and failed to live up to God’s holy standards, but in our generation as Daniel’s to plead for God in mercy to revive us again for the greater honour and glory of His name.

3. **Does it matter to you whether people come to faith?**

For Paul and the congregation in Rome and every other Christian congregation down the centuries for that matter there are questions we need to address when we read passages like Romans 9:1-5. These are questions we can take away to pray over today and in coming days.

(a) **Does it matter to you whether people are saved or not?** Does it matter? Or is it ‘each to their own’, every viewpoint is of equal validity! We must be careful to distinguish here between our historic principle of liberty of conscience in matters of faith in which we defend absolutely the right of all people to hold to any particular faith or to adhere to no faith and still be full participating citizens in the life of our country and our firm conviction that Jesus *is the way the truth and the life* (John 14:6). The exclusive claims of the Gospel offensive as they are to some will be maintained because they are true. There is a heaven and a hell and each person has a personal responsibility before God for the choices they make whether to put their faith in Him through Jesus or not. It matters to us I trust because the decisions we make

in this life have eternal consequences. Paul's passion to see people come to Christ was his underlying motivation for his work and witness. In the context of writing about the rights and responsibilities of a minister of the Gospel, Paul digressed helpfully to highlight his motivation for mission. ¹⁶ *For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!* ¹⁷ *If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me.* ¹⁸ *What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.* ¹⁹ *Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.* ²³ *I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings.* (I Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23). If we share this conviction with Paul then both individually, in our families and in our church family it will significantly influence our pattern of priorities; of how we view our lives and those of other people around us.

(b) **Does it matter whether your family friends and neighbours are saved or not?** If this Gospel is true for people in general then it is especially so for us concerning those closest to us, whose names we know and with whom we interact on a regular basis. For those of us who are parents do we let our children know that following Jesus and the kind of person they are is infinitely more important than the success they have in school or university examinations or in sporting or musical or artistic endeavours? We do want them to do their best and have no future regrets and try their hardest –don't misunderstand me here, but do we keep the main thing the main thing? In the workplace which can be competitive for promotions or publications or rivalry in sporting or other competitions do we communicate that character and personal integrity will not be sacrificed in the accomplishment of goals. This can be teased out in many ways. I worked for a time for a sales company that wanted employees to work every Saturday and Sunday and take time off during the week. As a Christian I pointed out that this was not acceptable as Sunday was God's day and when they saw that I was willing to put in the hours at other times it was accepted. There are some forms of employment, not least in the National Health Service where people have to be cared for and Sunday working cannot be avoided; there are other contexts where on a rota basis we may have to work occasionally; but there are sacrifices to make for our priorities. As Christian adults we model to our children and grandchildren and to the other young people in our midst our Christian principles for living. After all if Jesus doesn't have first place in our lives then it will not convince other people to make a choice for Him. [My father lady converted on last Sunday in Church and his funeral plans –message for neighbours who would attend story]

(c) **Do you pray for the salvation of people you don't get on with?** There are people we really struggle to relate to and often vice versa. We could simply ignore them as much as possible or think negative thoughts about them. Why not be radical and pray for their conversions! Or think of some way of showing the love of Jesus to them?

(d) **Do you pray for people who have seriously messed up their lives?** There are other people some in prison others in the community who have made bad choices with their lives. It may be that God might put it in your heart to pray for some person or people who have failed in society's eyes. There is no-one beyond hope –the one thing we can do for someone is to pray for them.

(e) **Do you pray for those people who had the privilege of hearing the Gospel but walked away from it?** One of the painful things we may experience is seeing family members, or friends or colleagues who once professed or were seriously interested in the Gospel walking away from it and showing no interest at all. Will you give up on them or keep praying for them? There may be other forms of witness possible –but keep on praying for God to triumph in their lives, for Jesus' sake Amen.

