

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Romans 9:1-13
“Privileges Are Not Enough”

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(1st Sunday After Epiphany)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

ROMANS 9:1-13 (RSV*)
"PRIVILEGES ARE NOT ENOUGH"

Defend God's Fidelity/Character

A. 9:1-33 PAUL'S ANGUISH OVER HIS DIVIDED PEOPLE.

1:16, Chap. 9-11 = All About Election

Structure (3x): 1) Thesis, 2) Elaboration, 3) Q & A + Scripture

1) vv.1-2 Thesis: a) Dual Oath, b) Dual Witness, c) Dual Agony (Intensification). Paul's Lament

5x2 Dual Format (vv.1-2, 3), Paul (I/Me) = Conscience + Heart, *in Christ/Spirit*

1a I am speaking the truth *in* Christ,/ I am not lying; Outward, +/- Oath In Christ, 1 Tim. 2:7, 2 Cor. 11:31, Gal. 1:20
 b my conscience bears me witness/ *in* the Holy Spirit, Inward, 3 Witnesses: Conscience/Christ/Holy Spirit
 2 that I have great sorrow/ and unceasing anguish (distress) *in* my heart. Pathos, *heart* (2:15, 5:5, 6:17, 8:27)
 style="text-align: right;">10:1 // *heart, brethren*, duality (new start)*

2) vv.3-13 Elaboration And Explanation: Privilege And Division In Israel, Two Parts.

Word Of God Has Not Failed; Election True, God Faithful

a) vv.3-5 Grounding/For: Paul's Dual Wish-Prayer, 7 Privileges, Israel As A Whole.

Inclusion: *Christ/flesh* (v.3) // *flesh/Christ* (v.5b)

3 1 For I could wish that I myself were accursed/ and cut off from Christ Prayer, *Damned*, Hyperbole, Ex. 32:31-32
 for the sake of my brethren,/ my kinsmen by flesh (race). 4:1, Family/Fellow Jews/My People
 style="text-align: right;">Modern Americans: We Are Not Tribal As Is Middle East

4a 2 They are (remain) Israelites, //3:1-2, Chosen/Elect, Religious Status (11:29): Basic Identity, 2 Cor. 11:22
 style="text-align: right;">4:22, Salvation Is Of The Jews! Third Person, Great Resume/Credentials

b 2' and to them belong the sonship, 1 Ex. 4:22, Dt. 14:1, Hos. 11:1, 7 Enduring Privileges Of The Family
 the glory, 2 //11:36b, Ex. 16:10, 24:15-18, 34:30, Red Sea/Sinai/Temple: Visible
 and the covenants,/ 3 Gen. 17:9-10, Ex. 2:24, 19:5, Jer. 31:32, Noah/Abraham/Sinai/David
 and the giving of the law, 1' (*ia, a, ai//ia, a, ai*), 3:2, Macc. 6:23, Ex. 20:1-17, Dt. 4:5-6, 31:9-26
 and the worship, 2' Ex. 25-31, Lev. 16:1-23:43 = Worship Legislation, Tent + Temple
 and the *promises*; 3' //vv.8b, 9, Gen. 12:2-7, 15:4-6, 22:15-18, Dt.18:15-18, Ex. 3:9-12, Eph. 3:12
 5a to them belong the patriarchs, 7 9:6, 13; Bridge To Next Section On 2 Generations Of Patriarchs
 style="text-align: right;">Dt. 4:7, Climax = 8th Messiah Jesus, John 1:11

b 1' and from whom, according to the flesh, is the Christ (Messiah).(.) 1:3, Genealogy, Jewish Jesus, Claim To Deity?
 c the one who is over all, God be blessed for ever. Amen. 11:29, Doxology + Amen, Phil. 2:6, Titus 2:13. 2 Cor. 11:31
 style="text-align: right;">Miss The Climax Of The List! Paul Evokes Scripture To Tell Israel's Story

b) vv.6-13 Countering An Objection, Has God's Word Failed? No! Israel Is Divided.

Agenda, *Word Of God*: vv.6a, v.7b, vv.10-13, (a-b-c-b'-a') Pattern

6a 1 But (Now) it is not as though the Word of God had failed (fallen). **Echo Is. 40:8, 55:11**, Unbelief, Miss The Messiah?
 style="text-align: right;">2 Uses Of *Israel*: 1) Patriarch, 2) People. Principle Of Division 1: v.6b

b 2a For not all who are descended from Israel Jacob's New Name, Separation: Descent vs. Children, a-b//a'-b'
 b belong to Israel, 2 Uses Of *Israel*, Paul Distinguishes Biological & Filial Descent

7a a' and not all are children of Abraham Children (*tekna*), No = Seed, Midrashic Argument
 b' because they are his descendants (seed); Plural *descendants*
 style="text-align: right;">God Has Always Worked On The Principle Of Election

b 3 **but "Through Isaac shall your descendants (seed) be named."** Gen. 21:12 (3x), Not Ishmael
 style="text-align: right;">Principle Of Division 2: v.8

8a 2'a This means that it is not the children of the flesh Paul Distinguishes Between Types: Ishmael/Isaac
 b who are the children of God, //Gal. 4:21-27

b a' but the children of the *promise* Isaac: Child Of Promise, Took God's Power, Not Ishmael
 b' are reckoned as descendants (seed). True Spiritual Children Now Includes Gentiles
 style="text-align: right;">Israel Came Into Being Through Election, Continues So

9 1'a For this is what the Word of *promise* said, //v.6a, Dual Witness Of God's Word As True: 1) Isaac, 2) Jacob
"About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son." Not Hagar, God's Promise, Gen. 18:10 // v.14
 style="text-align: right;">2 Generations: Through Isaac (vv.6b-9), Through Jacob (vv.10-13)

Generation 2
 10 1 And not only so, Link Phrase, A Second, Strong Confirming Example Of Selection
 but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac./ Also Barren, Gen. 25:19-27:40.
 style="text-align: right;">2 Children, Same Father/Mother, God's Choice

11a 2 though they were not yet born God Always Works By Election/Call/Purpose
 and had done nothing either good or bad./ Not An Ethical Issue Of Who's Better
 style="text-align: right;">Line Of Isaac/Jacob, Not Ishmael/Esau, Multiple Generations

b 2' in order that God's purpose of *ELECTION* might continue (stand), //v.16, 1st *Eklogen/Selection*, 11:5, 7, 28
 12a not because of works but because of his call,/ //v. 24, Twins, God's Free, Creative Action Is Primary
 style="text-align: right;">//v.32b, works: Inclusion For Chap. 9-11

b 1' she was told, **"The elder will serve the younger."** Solidarities, Reverses Cultural Norms, Dt. 23:7, Gen. 25:23
 13 As it is written, **"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."** Semitic Contrast: Hyperbolic, Mal. 1:2-3 (Prophets: Start/Finish!)

A Brief Treatment Of Romans 9:1-13

Chapters 9-11 are a new internal essay dealing with the past, present, and future of ethnic Israel in relationship to Christ and Scripture. God's purpose and election are large themes. The section falls into parallel three panels (A. 9:1-33, B. 10:1-11:12, C. 11:13-36), each with the same three part outline (1. Thesis and Direct Address [9:1-2//10:1-2//11:13-14], 2. Elaboration [9:3-13//10:3-17//11:15-24], 3. Diatribe and Scripture [9:14-32//10:18-11:12//11:25-36]). Doxologies (9:5//9:36) acts as inclusions for the whole. The big issue is how God is faithful to his promises in the face of resistance and unbelief.

There is an abrupt and jarring shift from the exclamations of 8:38-39 that nothing can separate us from God's love to the intense personal lament of 9:1-3. The *I* of Paul's testimony ties the two together. But it appears Israel has been separated, and this is a source of Paul's intense concern. In a solemn vow he evokes multiple witnesses to his agony. He speaks of himself in the initial phrase *I am speaking*, refers to *my conscience* as an internal referee of truth, invokes both *in Christ* and *in the Holy Spirit* as dual witnesses, and names the seat of emotion as *my heart*. The man in all his capacities and relationships is involved. The form of the oath (9:1-2) and its supportive reason (9:3) share a two part rhetorical pattern in which a statement is made and then intensified in five examples. He asserts, "I am speaking the truth in Christ," and denies its opposite, "I am not lying" (v.1a) His conscience is an internal witness, as is the Holy Spirit (v.1b). He has *great sorrow* and also *unceasing anguish in my heart* (v.2). Verse 3 continues the pattern as *accursed* is intensified by *cut off from Christ*. *My brethren* is then set in parallel to *my kinsmen by flesh*. The two-beat rhythm in five examples, the invocation of witnesses, and the climactic offer of self-sacrifice make a total appeal. Paul stands with Moses (Ex. 32:31-32) in his sacrificial desire to see God's people saved, but his self sacrifice is unnecessary. His method is to have the rhetorical pattern bridge between the thesis (vv.1-2) and its grounding (*For/Gk. gar*, v.3). It's a dramatic start!

The Elaboration (2. vv.3-13) has two parts: a. vv.3-5 which offers a reason (*For/gar*, v.3a), and b. vv.6-13 which offers a contrast (*But/de*, v.6a). The antonym of *fallen* (v.6a) and *stand* (v.11b) frame the two paragraphs. The structure of vv.3-5 is a 4:2 concentric pattern (1-2//2'-1') with the *Christ, flesh*, and the opposition of *cursed/blessed* as inclusions (v.3//v.5b). At the center (2//2') are first a general reference to God's people (*Israelites*, v.4a), then a list of seven privileges (vv.4b-5a) bounded by the framing phrase *and to them belong* (vv.4b//5a). The climactic eighth is the Messiah from their own stock (v.5b). The concluding doxology (v.5c) may be read to name Christ as God or God as God and remains disputed, though I learn towards the first. The issue is not whether Paul thinks of Christ as deity but whether this is an example or not. The intent of vv.3-5 is to heighten the thesis: How could so many with so much over such a long time miss Messiah Jesus? Is religious privilege the last place to hide from God's surprising revelation in Christ? Heritage and faith are not always the same, are they?

The second part of the Elaboration falls into two parts: vv.6-9 dealing with the first patriarchal generation of Abraham/Sarah/Ishmael-Isaac, vv.10-13 with the second of Isaac/Rebecca/Esau-Jacob. The structure of vv.6-9 is a 5:1 chiasm with *Word* as an inclusion (v.6a//v.9a) and with a general reference to *the Word of God* at the beginning and citations at the center (v.7b) and end (v.9). The distinction between mere physical descent from Abraham and being a child of God's promise through Isaac and not Ishmael is dealt with in vv.6b-7a//v.8. Not all who are genetically related to Abraham are in the line of promise, which is through Isaac alone (v/7b). Not the one Abraham created with Hagar (Ishmael) but the son God enabled through barren Sarah is where election is made. It is not human initiative but God's selection that counts. To be secure, salvation is grounded in God's choice. The second part (vv.10-13) has a 4:2 format (1-2//2'-1'), and here we find the first use of *election* (v.11b). In a reversal of cultural expectations, the elder will serve the younger. It is not human ethics and performance that is first; God's call is primary. The concluding blunt contrast is from Malachi 1:2-3. Semitic hyperbole heightens the absolute contrast.

PRIVILEGES ARE NOT ENOUGH

“I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying.”

Some things are worth a solemn oath.

R O M A N S 9 : 1 a

On November 9, 1938, Nazi forces smashed windows and set fire to 1,400 synagogues across Germany and Austria. In the process they destroyed thousands of hand copied Torah scrolls. Imagine a church being burned down in every town in America and it’s pulpit Bible destroyed, as ISIS had done in Iraq and Syria. What would the next day be like in post-Jewish Germany and post-Christian America? Demolishing the scrolls was often made a public spectacle so that all who stood by were implicated. In one town, the Bible scrolls were sent rolling down a street as Hitler Youth rode over them on bicycles. In Berlin they were burned in a public square. In a synagogue yard in Düsseldorf, German men— some wearing the robes of the rabbis and cantors— danced round the fire. It’s the *Night of Broken Glass, Kristillnacht* in German.

The intense hatred was pervasive and purposeful. In his book, *A World Without Jews*, Professor Alon Confino argues that in order for the Nazi imagination to flourish, they had to cut themselves off from everything Jewish, including the Hebrew Scriptures. The symbolic burning Old Testament scrolls would liberate Germany from the constraints of Judeo-Christian ethics and beliefs. It’s easier to enact darkness if first you cut off the lights. He writes:

"[Burning the Hebrew Bible scrolls] ... was a project to construct a new German Christianity that would owe nothing to the Jews and other Christian Europeans. The enslavement of Europeans [to the Nazi's worldview] ... depended on the destruction of the Jews first.... On February 3, 1944, the Reich Press Office announced that

‘the Jewish question is the key to world history.’”¹

And with that statement I agree, though for vastly different reasons.

If, among the world’s religious options, the God of the Jews and revealed to the Jews is the only true God and in a category of one– which I believe is true; and if God has chosen them to be a select people forever- which I believe is true; and if the Old Testament is a faithful record of God’s dealing with his nation and their neighbors- which I believe is true; and if their impact on history for the good of all is all out of proportion to their number– for which there is considerable evidence,² then the Reich Office was right for all the wrong reasons, "The Jewish question is the key to world history."

This new tribe, rescued from long slavery in Egypt, were introduced to and then introduced the world to the only true and Living God, Yahweh the Lord, the holy Creator of all that is, and for that privilege they’ve paid an unimaginably high price in suffering and blood, with Kristillnacht as a tipping point towards their near destruction. And their greatest gift, and the one on which we still disagree, is a mother and her son, the Jew Jesus of Nazareth and his Virginal Mother Mary, who he is or isn’t, or who he may yet be revealed to be. A very Jewish answer to the question, “Is Jesus the Messiah?” is “We will have to wait and see.” Rabbi Peter Schweitzer quipped, "Years ago, a popular evangelical bumper sticker read, "I found it." Our version reads, "I'm still looking for it."³ to which I add a third, “Let’s talk about Jesus the Jew.”

¹ Alon Confino, "Why the Nazis Burned the Hebrew Bible," www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/why-the-nazis-burned-the-hebrew-bible.

² Zach Pontz, “Richard Dawkins Perplexed by High Number of Jewish Nobel Prize Winners,” (www.algemeiner.com/2013/10/29/richard-dawkins), the key Dawkins quote being, “Race does not come into it. It is pure religion and culture. Something about the cultural tradition of Jews is way, way more sympathetic to science and learning and intellectual pursuits than Islam.”

³ "What Does the Concept of the Messiah Mean Today?" *Moment* (March/April 2012), www.momentmag.com/what-does-the-concept-of-the-messiah-mean-today.

Romans 9:1-13. 6

Now as a Southern boy and Methodist lad of the 50's and 60's, I was not so much taught prejudice explicitly as I absorbed it from the surrounding culture. Ours was a privileged home full of history books and world atlases, multiple newspapers delivered each morning, weekly news magazines and medical journals, because both my parents valued learning, but still the absorption occurred. It was in the air, and education is not a sufficient defense.

So I grew up with racial prejudice disguised as benevolent condescension, a bit of anti-Catholic prejudice because they weren't Methodist or Baptist I guess, some anti-gypsy resentment since they rolled through town once a year and caused troubles at the hospital, and a slight case of anti-Jewish prejudice largely based on old stereotypes and a kind of bigotry against all things foreign. The only Jew I knew in Cheraw was Sid Epstein who ran a dime store and had a beautiful Middle Eastern looking daughter four years my senior. We had an Austrian man in town who'd served in the German Army as a teenager and whom his best golf buddies affectionately called *The Nazi*; Sid was known by his closest Protestant friends and customers as *The Jew*. Ethic humor was still allowed in those days, and I remember as a twelve year old buying and laughing my way through a Jewish joke book full stereotypes. I'd hear an adult make a slanderous statement, and I did not yet have the sophistication to analyze and critique it, and in my world children did not confront adults in public on ethics.

But the toxic crud we naively absorb along the way, if we are to follow Jesus, must eventually be surfaced and sifted, and that happened for me in an intense fashion the first years after my conversion at nineteen and has continued to his day, to this very week in fact because of today's text from Romans.

Visiting a Jewish synagogue and Catholic worship service as part of a college course on world religions was a good beginning. The academic study of the life of Jesus in his Jewish environment was a great help. Eventually visiting Dachau in Munich and doing some reading on the Holocaust wounded my heart permanently. Being part of a regular Jewish/Christian dialog in Columbia deepened my insight, and I will never forget how—around a meal one night- a grandmotherly woman rolled up her long sleeve blouse to display the tattoo of her Nazi prison camp. All her family but her died there. Visiting Israel twice, the Yad Vashem museum as well as the Holocaust Museum in

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Washington, have been poignant refresher courses in how evil may inhabit an political ideology. This week I reviewed several recent news articles on the resurgence of Anti-Semitism in Europe linked to Muslim immigration. Reading a thirty page encyclopedia article on the “History of Antisemitism” late Thursday reminded me just how much of the long Jewish agony has been as the hands of the church and supposedly Christian rulers.⁴

The few times I’ve had occasion to talk about my faith with Jews, my first words were not, “Can I tell you about Jesus?” but “As a pastor, I’m sorry for the misery the church has inflicted on your people. Will you forgive us for forgetting the covenant you have with God?” And then, if they showed interest, I made my witness and took questions.

When I baptized Mel Klein– a secular Jew– in Georgetown and asked him, “Mel, what made Jesus real to you?” his answer was as simple as it was profound, “The way this church loved me and answered my questions and did not rush me. Your reading the gospels with me also helped.” Mel was living with an old flower child who’d studied under Timothy Leary at Berkeley and dropped acid with him, but the grace of God drew them to us. I did their wedding in a hospital room, baptized Mel one Sunday morning with all his funky friends in attendance, and later his funeral. It was an immense privilege, watching an alienated son of Israel come home to the Messiah and his people. He from the old root stock, me a wild branch grafted in.

On another front, going back and asking the black women who cared for me as a child to forgive me for anything cruel or racist I said was a marker in my repentance. Leading a monthly inter-racial pastors group in Georgetown for nine years built understanding. Preaching in black churches and having them shout back “Bring it on down, Preacher, bring it on down,” fired me with fresh zeal. Sanctification, which is a form of spiritual de-tox, particularly at the heart level, is a long journey as layer by layer our minds are renewed and we see ourselves and others through new eyes.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_antisemitism.

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But can it go too far and lead to an over-reaction? Just recently, when the official synod of German Protestants officially renounced all Jewish evangelism,⁵ I knew something central to the New Testament was being forfeited because of Holocaust guilt.⁶

Jesus is for all peoples, and that includes his own. Not the coerced conversions of the past, but a continuing respectful witness to who Jesus is and why he means so much to us. We cannot convert anyone, and must renounce all forms of pressure and coercion, including veiled threats and public discrimination. We make our witness with prayer and care, even our careful arguments, but then leave it to the Holy Spirit and the fresh encounters he provides to make the case. We are living pointers, but the risen Jesus is perfectly capable of getting people's attention. After all, he's alive, isn't he? and able to interact with any person he chooses.

If Jesus is not the Savior of his own people, and if only we outsider, pagan, unclean, pork-eating Gentiles need was he has to offer, then the New Testament and the faith of the early church has been gutted, and I do not accept it. Every nation has its horror stories, blights on its character and national myth, and the three big ones for us Americans are three hundred years of slavery, our treatment of Native Americans, and the war on the unborn for the last forty

⁵ Carol Kuravilla, "German Evangelical Church Renounces Anti-Semitic Mission To Convert Jews," *Huffington Post*, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/germany-lutheran-anti-semitism_us_582f5a01e4b099512f82b091. For a thoughtful alternative, see Andreas Kostenberger, "The Berlin Declaration On the Uniqueness of Christ and Jewish Evangelism in Europe Today, 2008, www.biblicalfoundations.org/the-berlin-declaration.

⁶ Sarah Zylstra, "Orthodox Rabbis Say Christianity Is God's Plan, Vatican Says Stop Evangelizing Jews," 12/18/2105, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december-web-only/orthodox-rabbis-and-vatican-exchange-olive-branches. See also "Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity, December 3, 2015, <http://cjcuc.com/site/2015/12/03/orthodox-rabbinic-statement-on-christianity> and the earlier 2000 statement "Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians And Christianity," *First Things*, November 2000, www.firstthings.com/article/000/1/dabru-emet-a-jewish-statement-on-christians-and-christianity.

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years. But for the Germans it's the Holocaust of eighty years ago, the murder of six million Jews and that the church for the most part was silent.

If God is Triune— Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that is the deepest conviction of the church, then the Son who became incarnate in Jesus the Jew is not peripheral but central to God's person and work. Not to offer him as Savior and Forgiver and Healer and Lord and Victor over Evil and Death is to make our own sins more important than him and his work, and that is not only a loss of faith but of intellectual nerve. If the God of Jews is most clearly self-defined in Jesus, then no one gets a pass or a bypass. He is who he is despite the often horrible failures of his followers, and we just need to own up to it. Jesus is for Jews of all stripes, and he is for us Gentiles of all backgrounds. The good news of what God is up to in Jesus, as Paul so clearly said earlier in Romans, is "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek, the Gentile."⁷ Them first, us second. Them as family, us as adoptees, and that priority has never been rescinded.

Arthur Burns, a Jewish economist of great influence in Washington during the tenure of several Presidents— including a stint as Fed Chair in the 70s— was once asked to pray at a gathering of evangelical politicians. Stunning his hosts, he prayed thus: "Lord, I pray that Jews would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Buddhists would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Muslims would come to know Jesus Christ." And then, most stunning of all: "And Lord, I pray that Christians would come to know Jesus Christ."⁸ That's it! He is for all the world; he is key that unlocks and fills whatever truth people have. In him every religious tradition, even his own, is sifted and reorganized around himself.

I confess that we've lost something precious as middle of the road Protestants with a United Methodist spin. And that something is a passion to see people come to Jesus Christ as his new followers. "Be nice" and "be good" and "be moderate" has taken on a higher profile than "be saved" and "be a

⁷ 1:16.

⁸ Mark Buchanan, "Singing in the Chains," *Christianity Today* (February 2008), www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/february/15.30.html33.

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follower.” Our message has devolved to “come be like us” more than “know him and become like him.”

And this is the core reason, I fear, that we see so few find new faith among us. We really don’t think it’s that important. At meetings we pastors talk more about apportionments paid and service projects done than about confessions of faith or signs and wonders, as if they were an embarrassment. There’s little concern on our part for the lost except on the sociological and political level. For us Jesus has become a religious add-on, an optional extra for those who like *that sort of thing*, rather than an organizing center for a new life. And so we don’t commend him much to others. So afraid are we of offense in these multicultural and politically correct days where all truth claims are now under suspicion as power agendas that we’ve nearly gone silent.

So let me say it clearly so that you’ve heard it at least once and I am officially off the hook, “You need to be saved from sin and delivered from evil and death by Jesus Christ so that you can learn his ways and follow him all your days in a living relationship. He is your only hope.” And if you refuse his offer or stop short, kidding yourself that you were Methodist or Baptist or Catholic will be the very thing that damns you. You can miss Jesus and yet sit here every Sunday. Such is the deceptive power of the forces arrayed against us.

This is why the passion and anguish of Paul in the first verses of chapter 9 of Romans is so strange to us, and for that reason so challenging to our complacency. Paul hurts in his heart and is in constant grief that so few of his tribe see Messiah Jesus as he does. He lets us in on his feelings in verses 1 through 3 in a carefully formulated pattern of five lines, each with two parts.

Now because of his official role as missionary to the Gentiles, Paul may have been accused of neglecting his own people, which a quick read through the Book of Acts shows is just not true, but he was sensitive to the issue, so he makes a formal oath invoking all the witnesses he can muster:

“I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bearing me (inward) witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing distress in my heart.”

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Paul is the *I* and the *me*; his *conscience* is an internal judge of truth, his *heart* the seat of emotion. With all his faculties, with the risen *Christ* above him and the *Spirit* within as dual witnesses, he confesses his constant grief that most of his fellow Jews have not been converted. It's a remarkable moment, a vulnerable confession. Paul bears a burden for his own people. And to demonstrate how serious he is and how high the stakes, he adds in verse 3 these words, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers and sisters, my kinsmen by flesh."

Now this is a deliberate exaggeration, but not by much. What parent would not gladly take on their child's leukemia or addiction if—by some medical miracle—there could be such a switch? But there can't be, and no more human sacrifice is required since the one time, voluntary self-offering of Jesus. It's not that God is only willing to save so many, and if Paul heroically opts out, there's room for one more Jew. That would make Paul more loving than God, which is a form of blasphemy. But Paul is telling us the God's truth when he gives an inward peak at the depth of his desire for God's people to see the truth about Jesus, that he welcomes and forgives and puts us into a new restored relationship with his Father, which is something no religion could do, not even his own with its immense status and privileges. There is no independent path into the heart of God that excludes Jesus Christ.

What God offers in the Son who comes from within the divine life is not optional but necessary. We are made to know God; all are alienated from God because of rebellion and unbelief, caught in a web of ignorance and deception, and God is known in Jesus the Jew as nowhere else. And so the question is, and I think legitimately, Is there anyone over whose salvation you have ongoing agony? And if no one, why not? Are all your family saved? All your neighbors? All your friends? What would it mean for Jesus to let you in on his concern for people near you? He wants to give them a new life, a new future, and use you as a platform, and do you give a rip? What if God said, "You are one of my bridges. Let's work together to build a case that life goes better with my Son? Are you up for it?" And if so, don't be surprised if you start feeling a bit like Paul with an ache in your heart as a reminder of God's love for his still-resistant children.

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Several years ago I read the testimony of Taffy Akner, a non-practicing Jew who wrote a lengthy piece for *GQ* about Pastor Carl Lentz of Hillsong Church in New York City. As if still surprised, she wrote:

“And here I have to say out loud how much I like Carl.... I like him even though he is ideologically opposed to things that are important to me.... He is so worried for my soul, and this should annoy me, but instead it touches me, because maybe I'm worried about my soul, too, and Carl wants so badly for me to enjoy heaven with him. How can I fault someone who is more sincere about this one thing than I have ever been about anything in my life? But on the other hand, if there's one thing that's true about Christianity, it's that no matter [its cultural expression], it's still afraid for your soul, it still thinks you're in for a reckoning. It's still Christianity. Christianity's whole jam is remaining Christian.” What a great last line!

After attending Hillsong several weeks, Taffy explained that she didn't go to church but instead:

“I went to soccer games with my children and ordered a pizza, and as I cleaned the kitchen and filled the dishwasher... hummed Hillsong's music to myself. Then I straightened up suddenly and looked out the window into the dark nothing and realized I missed them all very much.”⁹

This is what we want. For our lives to leave a mark, so when they're not with us, something's missing. And the something Taffy missed and could not yet name was the risen Jesus. It's him people find attractive as he shines through us with all our oddities and quirks and flaws. Are you concerned for anyone else's soul? Does it worry you enough to pray and work and love and witness as God leads? To take awkward moments and speak up using the name of Jesus? Not the pastor's name, not the church name, but the name of Jesus!

⁹ Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "What Would Cool Jesus Do?" *GQ*, (Jan. 2016).

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What troubled Paul most with his wide and deep grasp of all things Jewish was that, with all their privileges, with the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises, and even the Messiah himself come among them as Jesus as the grand climax, so many missed it. Lots of complex reasons. He did not appear as expected as a conquering king; he did not have the approval of Jerusalem elites; he hung out with the immoral and irreligious; he attacked and exposed their religious leaders in embarrassing ways; he caused a scene in the temple; he ignored the clean and unclean laws that separated the pure from the impure; he touch and healed Gentiles; and perhaps worst of all he risked what freedoms the Romans had left them with his overtly political language of the coming of God's kingdom. To say of himself that he was Son in a unique sense was to compromise the Lord's Oneness. No one could claim to know the divine mind as he did. It's arrogant.

Jesus was finally just too much of a threat, and so their leaders with Rome's help and complicity and capital authority, had him done in a way that made clear to all that he was no Messiah but a fool and deceiver under a curse, so take notice. And to admit later that this was a grave injustice added to the reasons to reject him and his crazy followers who claimed their Jewish God had vindicated him in a surprise resurrection and appearances as the Sent One, the Messiah, the Savior, the promised one they'd missed and done in.

It was just too much to accept, but 3000 did on the day of Pentecost,¹⁰ and despite the later, increasing flood of Gentiles into the church, Jesus has always had his Jewish followers. And could it be, then as now, that such immense religious privilege as the Jews had among all peoples of the earth is simply not enough, that it may be the last place to hide from what God has done by showing up at ground level as Jesus, the unlikely reformer from Nazareth, on a cross one Friday, ruling the world two days later at the right hand of the Father?

So are the Jews especially obstinate? No, but theirs is a warning of what happens to us as well. To dwell secure within the riches of the church: the creeds and sacraments, the traditions and the high ethics, the sense of belonging

¹⁰ Acts 2:1-21.

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and faith, an assurance that we are the center of God’s concern. Cannot all these good things numb us to the radical call of God in Jesus Christ just as in Paul’s day? How tragic to stop one step short, whether that be in classic Judaism of Paul’s day or the life of the church in ours. As someone once said, “God has some the church doesn’t, and the church has some God’s doesn’t,” and it the second group that concerns us. The religious who have not a relationship.

So what about the next paragraph, verses 6 through 13, and all the controversy surrounding them? Well, if in the first five verses Paul countered the charge he did not care for his own people, then in the next eight he answers an even more basic question, one that strikes at the heart of the divine character: Has the Word of God fallen and failed, which is only a slightly veiled way of asking the unthinkable, Has God’s will for his people failed? With so many Jews rejecting Jesus as Messiah, what’s going on?

Now the advantage of Paul and his hearers, particularly the Jewish ones, is that they knew the Genesis stories of Abraham well enough to follow Paul’s condensed argument, and we don’t, so let me attempt a summary.

When God wanted to form a people on whom to lavish his love for the sake of the whole world, he spoke to Abraham in present day Iraq and promised him a son.¹¹ The old man said Yes and began a pilgrim life of following the Lord’s lead and having all his character flaws exposed. And when long years had passed and still no son came through his barren wife Sarah, they came up with a plan to help God out– never a good idea! Abraham would sire a child with her handmaid Hagar, and so came Ishmael, not the child of promise but of human religious scheming and the forebear of all the Arabs. “Look what we helped God do!”

“No,” said God, “Though Isaac shall your seed be named.”

And in a remarkable visit recorded in Genesis 18 a promise is given, “About this time (next year) I will return, and old barren Sarah shall have a son of her own.” And because she laughed at the ridiculous idea, the boy is named *Isaac*, laughter, and so it was.

¹¹ Genesis 12:1ff.

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Had not God healed Sarah’s barrenness, there would have been no boy. He was conceived naturally, but his origin was enabled by God’s active promise. He is chosen; he is elected by God; he, and not Ishmael, is thus the child of promise, the one through whom God’s pledges will be fulfilled. Ishmael receives promises too, but not the ones given to Abraham. And in the second generation, with two boys in her womb, Rebecca learns that God will reverse the cultural norm where the younger serves the elder and that Jacob is the one through whom God’s promise to Abraham will flow, and it has nothing to do with their moral behavior, good or bad, but only God’s choosing.

This is God’s free election, God’s guiding purpose, God’s sovereign selection through which to bring about his purposes of creating a people who will bear his name to all the world and eventuate in Jesus the Jew, God the Son come down to ground level as the climax of divine self-disclosure. It cannot rest on anything but God’s choice. It cannot rest on human ideas, as with Abraham and Sarah and Ishmael as if God needs our plans; it cannot rest on the norms of human culture and customs of primogeniture where the oldest are the heirs; it cannot rest on parental preference or favorite sons; it cannot rest on good works or be cancelled by bad ones, either actual or anticipated.

For God’s goal of offering all the world a way home, salvation in the fullest sense must rely on and be grounded in God’s choices alone. God has chosen, and while see the outworkings across Jewish and Christian history, many of the details leave us bewildered. But this is sure, says Paul. God’s Word, as a reflection of God’s will and beyond that of God’s character, has neither fallen nor failed. And if not all the kids of Abraham are in the line of promise, why should we be surprised when we find that not all the offspring are true children, then and now, with them and with us. What we most need cannot rest on human fickleness; it must rest on God’s integrity and actions alone.

The goal is not to relish religion as an end but through it to know and be known by the One to whom it points in a living relationship. And so when someone tells me all about their grandparents’ faith and how long they’ve been Methodist and nothing about what Jesus means to them, I know they remain a

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step short. Religious heritage, however deep and wide and long, and however true and good— whether Jewish or Christian— is not a stopping point. Sorry, but there are no carbon copies between a church or synagogue roll book and the Lamb’s Book of Life, no family plan where you’re covered by what others before you believed. Your mother was a follower, but what about you? Good religion may be last place people hide from God, then and now.

The goal is to know God, not all about God. But that means disruptive change and an uncertain future and an ongoing intellectual and heart obedience in the company of others on the same route, and that’s a price some are just unwilling to pay and a risk they are unwilling to take. It was true for many Jews in Paul’s day, and it is true for many Christians in ours. Don’t give me a denominational label or family resume; let me hear your testimony of what the risen Jesus has and is doing as you follow him now. Has it given you a heart and mind for him, and because of that a deep burden for lost people? And if not, you’ve located yourself as still a step short.

What is Paul saying? At least this, that privilege and heritage are not enough. We are to actually enter the reality of knowing this great Trine God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And if you know this, you want it for others, like a cancer patient with a guaranteed cure. And if you don’t, it’s just our brand of religion, so take it or leave it.

To invite people to keep our religion and all its obligations and expenses afloat is not very attractive, and fewer and fewer in our day feel the need to do so. “Come help us pay the mortgage and uphold morals and preserve old music,” is not much of an appeal. Even I, a duty driven man with forty years of beating the church drum, find it less and less attractive.

But what if the Jew Jesus is unimaginably alive and calling all into the fellowship of human transformation that he controls? Might not that be worth the best time and attention of us all? It would for me.

