

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

THE CROSS OF THEOLOGIANS—AND PREACHERS

Romans 9:1-5

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Fred Niedner

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— 2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5 to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Author's Note: This lesson introduces the convoluted and notoriously difficult discourse on the eternal destiny of God's chosen people. In the preceding chapter, Paul has promised his readers that absolutely nothing can separate them from the love of God whom we know in Christ Jesus. However, Paul harbors a painful awareness of one thing, which perhaps some of his readers might remember, too, that appears to mitigate against his eloquent reminder of God's unbreakable faithfulness. For now, at least, the state and fate of the Jews who have rejected the Lord's Messiah seems to put the lie to Paul's claim that God's promises never come to naught. Why are some saved, others not? Who or what bears responsibility for thwarting the promising gospel's intended effect? Paul's preaching? His Jewish hearers' hard hearts? God's inscrutable will? A "yes" to any of

these three possibilities renders Paul's promises—and God's—untrustworthy.

DIAGNOSIS: Dying to Save the World

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): We've Tried Everything

We have preached, as winsomely as we know how, the gospel of God's eternal faithfulness and love as we receive and know them in the crucified Christ. Many, however, do not trust the promise we proclaim, including the Jews, the very people to whom God had already promised eternal faithfulness nearly two millennia before Jesus was born into a good, observant, Jewish family. Surely someone is to blame for this failure. Who is it? From the beginning, we have shown remarkable skill at finding someone to blame.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Blaming

When people don't believe our preaching and respond with repentance and faith, it's clearly their own damned fault. But we aren't so impervious to the accusing finger of the law we also preach to forget that the fault may well lie, at least partially, with us or with our preaching. Perhaps our own lives make us incredible witnesses of God's promises. Perhaps we are simply not eloquent enough and have not yet worked hard enough to preach with total winsomeness. Or maybe God is to blame. After all, God has been known to harden hearts, render perfectly sound messages ineffective, and arbitrarily choose to favor one child or one people over another.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Ultimate-Stakes Bargaining

We don't really want to accept blame ourselves, and sooner or later we get weary and nervous while blaming God, so it's easiest to blame the damned unbelievers. Still, the whole sorry

mess leaves us with anguish that never totally subsides. We lose heart. We no longer give of ourselves, and especially not our hearts. That said, we would trade body parts if only people would take our preaching to heart and join us in our confession. Some days, we'd trade even more—our very lives, our eternal lives—if only we could, to make the world take us seriously, because the sense of failure that envelops us when our witness goes unheeded bears all the darkness and dreaded finality of a wasted life. We sought to save the world but in the end we have given away our lives for nothing. And God stands by, watching.

PROGNOSIS: Dying to Save the World

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Life-Giving Dying
No life other than God's own could ever serve as the guarantee of God's love and faithfulness, and that has already been granted forever in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, who died with and for all, for the Jews and the Gentiles, the faithful and the unfaithful, the righteous and the unrighteous, those who love God and those who hate God, those who love and believe us and those who hate us and find us not only incredible, but risible. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all, including those who have not fallen as short as others, stand and ultimately die condemned—as condemned as Jesus Christ, whose dying with and for us all extends God's mercy to all, including those who, at least for now, do not know, believe, or care.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Resting Our Lives on the Promises We Preach

If God has indeed taken ultimate responsibility for the eternal fate of all, including those who for whatever reason do not or cannot believe our preaching, and God means in the end to have mercy on all, we needn't blame either ourselves or our detractors. Instead, we entrust ourselves and all those others

to the very mercy we preach.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Giving Our Lives—and Singing

Freed from having to give our lives to save the world, we give our lives in gratitude, embodying as well as speaking the mercy God has shown in Jesus Christ and would have every, last human soul receive and know. Freed from blaming ourselves, God, and those who laugh at both us and God, we laugh at ourselves and with others, including God. (When appropriate, we also weep with them.) Freed from self-imposed writhing in pain on the Crux Theologorum (the cross of all who beat their heads against unanswerable questions about God and God's ways), we sing a tune like, "O the depths and riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" That song proves endless.