

Pastor Barry South, CRE First Presbyterian Church Grand Bay August 2, 2026

OPENING SENTENCE: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

PRAYER of ADORATION: Thy name is our healing, O my God, and remembrance of thee is our remedy, nearness to thee is our hope, and love for thee is our companion. Thy mercy for us is our healing in both this world and the world to come. Thou art the All-bountiful, the All-knowing, and the All wise. AMEN.

Sermon: "Gloom, Despair, and Agony on Me"

Scripture: Romans 9:1-5

I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 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. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. AMEN.

PRAYER of ILLUMINATION: Gracious God, your word is a living word. By your Spirit awaken us, that we may see and hear your presence in the world and in the scripture that we read today. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our brother and guide. AMEN.

Paul opens the ninth chapter of Romans with his own intensely personal lament. In these verses, he expresses unfathomable grief and sorrow that his own people have not come to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul's lament echoes through the centuries into our present age and congregations. What might we say to Paul and to those in our midst who grieve for those who do not follow Christ?

Paul's passionate faith pours through the words directly preceding this particular selection: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? ...For I am convinced that neither death, nor life... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord" (8:35, 38-39). Paul's words mirror his experience of the living Christ, reflecting the love of God that has nourished and sustains us as we have sought to live as Christ disciples.

As parents of three children, Christine and I daily sought to guide our children in the way of the faith of Jesus Christ by example, teaching, and much prayer. We presented them as infants for baptism. In the water and the Word, Christ claimed them as his own beloved son or daughter, adopting them into his family. The promise and the inheritance are theirs. We have involved them in the life of the church. We have encouraged their faith. We profoundly desire that they experience the love of Jesus as we have and choose a life of discipleship; but we cannot control their choice. They alone must choose. So, at times we worry. We know others in the fellowship of believers who grieve for a son or daughter, a parent, a sibling, or a friend who has not chosen to follow Christ.

What might we say to Paul or to those in our church whose hearts are broken and filled with sorrow? Paul provides comfort and hope for us that he seems to miss for himself. He writes that to his people "belongs the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (v.4) His beloved people are recipients of great treasure, treasure that is valuable because of the one that gives it.

It is God who establishes the covenant. It is God who gives the law. It is God who is the focus of worship. It is God who is the promise maker and promise keeper. God will not abandon those to whom God has entrusted God's gifts.

It is God who called the patriarchs and matriarchs. It is God who sent the Messiah. It is God who called Saul on the road to Damascus. God alone calls each of us by name. All of this is a result of God's great love for the world, love that finally culminated in the sending of God's only Son. Nothing can separate us from

this love. We, along with Paul, must trust the love of God. Finally, Paul must place his people into the hands of God. So must we.

It is a rare congregation that gathers on Sunday morning without someone bearing a broken heart. Life is full of heartbreak, big and small, from daily disappointments to life-altering destruction. People are touched by death, divorce, conflict, job loss, financial woes, wayward children, elderly parents, illness, and aging.

Undoubtedly, there are some who might want to respond to the customary “How are you?” with Paul’s words; “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart” (v.2). However, the norms of polite behavior, governing especially our worship services, dictate that people keep silent about their deepest distress.

Paul will have none of that. In a letter that might have been read in a Roman worship service, he speaks of his own despair. After some of the most inspiring testimony in all of Christian Scripture (chapter 8), he seems to break down, fall apart, with grief over the failings of his own people to receive God’s gift of the Gospel. He is so distressed that he is willing even to surrender his own relationship with Christ, if only the Israelites could see what they have. These are members of the family who have excused themselves from the dinner table, and he will give up the most precious thing he has in order to get them back.

In congregations with any history of conflict, especially if it is recent, this ancient grief will be immediately understandable.

When close friends and even family members have left a church or a denomination, or given up on faith altogether, those who remain will miss and mourn them. For these, it is essential that this brief selection of the lectionary be read in the larger context of God’s sovereign love. Even when the faithful separate themselves from one another, nothing can separate any of us from the unfailing love of God (Rom. 8:38-39), not even, apparently, our own foolish rejection of that love.

Ours is a self-help culture, though, and it is easy to believe that fixing things is all up to us. Paul himself appears to fall into this trap, offering up his own soul to be cursed in exchange for the enlightenment of his fellow Jews, as though God would be persuaded by such a swap. For some in our churches, this holy hubris will play out as a conviction that the problems of the church can be cured by better preaching, stronger outreach, more fervent prayer, increased giving, or God help us, new carpet in the sanctuary. Others, equally self-centered, will despair that anything can be done and, instead of staying around to turn off the lights, will quietly slip out the back door.

For type A church members, a reminder that God is in charge – that the fate of Christianity does not rest entirely on their shoulders – can be a strong message. For the disillusioned, the same reassurance of the reach of God’s power can help to restore hope.

We also encounter a kind of division among the faithful that is not limited to the church but spills over into the social and political arenas. Conservative/evangelical Christians bemoan the lack of attention to the basics of scripture, while progressive/liberal Christians bristle at being considered less than faithful or being lumped together with the evangelicals.

Unlike Paul, though, we have for the most part tended to write each other off, ignoring the gracious fact of God’s irrevocable gifts and calling (Rom. 11:29), which extends beyond our own specific circles. We might be better to feel some of the sorrow of the apostle at the divisions that we have created among ourselves.

Paul has not had an easy time of it (2Cor. 11:24-28), and part of that stems from his anxiety for all the churches (2Cor. 11:28). How many of us could say the same, either from the pulpit or the pew?

While we may not look on the state of Christianity today with the same acuteness of grief that Paul felt, still we have our own sorrow and unceasing anguish, both with a meaning something like unspeakable pain. Brokenness in the world, in the church, in our own lives, when it is deeply felt, wounds us that way; it breaks our hearts. In an irony of faith, it may be that this is the way we come to know the strange workings of God in our lives.

The rabbi’s note that God writes the word, the law, on the heart rather than in it (Jer. 31:33). They say this is so that, when the heart breaks, the word falls into it. Absent the heartbreak, the word is never internalized as completely as with. Maybe this is how we come to know God, when God enters our hearts as fully as we have entered God’s, and we have shared some of the pain of God’s love rejected. Because surely God,

embodied in the Messiah (v.5), grieves at our refusal to be part of the blessed community (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34).

Every pastor who is honest about it will admit to some failure of ministry. Despite our best efforts, members of our faith community turn away. Even when we give it our all, there are some who will refuse to receive that gift of ourselves. While it will likely not be helpful to be as direct as Paul about how this feels, it is important for the preacher to speak from a position of authenticity, implicitly acknowledging personal disappointment and grief, but doing so in a way that always points to the grace and love of God.

For all of us, the last words of the selection are the most important, when Paul turns from his own despair to proclaim again the power of the Messiah “who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.” (v.5). It is that hope that puts our own losses and failures in the right context.

PRAYER:

God of compassion, you have given us Jesus Christ, the great physician, who made the broken whole and healed the sick. Touch the wounds, relieve our hurts, and restore us to wholeness of life, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

For those in our congregation who worry, who anguish, or bear great sorrow for those living outside the community of Christ, we must remind them that God is the source and giver of life. We must place our trust in God and entrust to God those for whom we are anxious. GO IN PEACE!

INSERT: God rules, God reigns, God, and God alone. And His way is right. It leads to His glory. Deep within the hearts of men and women, even though most would never acknowledge it, is the realization that we really don’t have the final answer. There is this little hidden clause tucked away in the deep recesses of most thinking minds that says, “There may be a God after all.” When we take this to the ultimate future for humanity, God is sovereignly in charge. One second after they die, the men and women who have rejected and resisted the Lord for years will step into eternity. One second... and they will be totally at loss to determine their future. God’s sovereignty steps over their lives and sets forth His decree, “That God may be all in all”. (1Cor. 15:28)