



My Heart's Desire

By John Piper

Copyright © 2015 The Apple of His Eye Mission Society, Inc. All rights reserved.



The Apple of His Eye Mission Society

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they might be saved. – Romans 10:1

Paul's Burning Question in Romans 9–11

Paul wrote Romans 9–11 to answer this question:

If Israel is God's chosen people, and if he gave to them the sonship and the glory and the covenants (9:4), and yet by and large they have rejected the Messiah and are cut off from Christ (9:3), then has not the word of God fallen? And if the surety of God's word to Israel has fallen, how does it stand with us who hope in the promise that those whom he called he will also glorify?

This was a burning question for Paul. All his hope as a Christian, all the purpose of his apostleship, hung on this question: has God's word to Israel fallen? Have all the glorious purposes of God for this people aborted because of their unbelief?

Not All Israel is Israel

Paul states his answer in 9:6, "It is not as though the word of God has fallen." And then he begins his explanation. How can it be that most Israelites are unbelieving and yet the purpose for Israel stands? The first part of the answer is given here in 9:6—"For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel."

In other words, God's word is still standing and his purpose is unshakable because he never decreed that every individual in Israel would be saved. From the very beginning he chose Isaac not Ishmael (verses 7–9), and Jacob not Esau (verses 10–13). Why? Verse 11 answers: "though they were not yet born and had done nothing good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, she was told, 'The elder will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"

The Freedom of God's Sovereignty

Not all Israel is Israel because God has a "purpose of election." Within Israel he chooses Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau, in order that it might be clear to all that the salvation of any is owing to the free and sovereign call of God. In other words, when Paul is confronted with the possible failure of God's promise, the place he takes his stand is on the freedom of God's sovereignty.

His word to Israel and to the Church cannot fall because it does not finally depend on Israel or the Church. Paul drives this for all it's worth in this chapter. Consider verse 15: "For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy." How, then, could his word and purpose ever fall, since they are not dependent on the will or exertion of man?

So you can see that Paul's confidence in verse 6 ("It is not as though the word of God has failed") is based squarely on the sovereignty of God to have mercy on whom he wills without any dependence on



the self-determining will of man. The purposes of God stand forever because he is GOD and "none can stay his hand or say to him, What doest thou!" (Daniel 4:35).

And so it goes on through this chapter.

Dangers Arising from This Doctrine

Now there are manifold dangers here.

1. Theological Dangers

There are theological dangers. First, a person might conclude that God is unjust in the exercise of his sovereignty. So Paul raises this question in verse 14: "Is there then injustice on God's part?" And secondly, a person might conclude that man can no longer be faulted for his sin if God is sovereign. So Paul raises this question in verse 19, "Why then does he still find fault?" So Paul is not unaware of the theological dangers in the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

2. Psychological Dangers

But these are not our concern this morning. There are psychological as well as theological dangers, and these are our concern today. Specifically, there are three emotional mistakes that we might make in response to this doctrine. Paul knows of these too and guards us from them. That's what we want to talk about today.

First, the doctrine of God's sovereignty might lead us to feel no sorrow for those who are perishing.

Second, the doctrine of God's sovereignty might lead us to feel no desire that they would be converted.

And third, the doctrine of God's sovereignty might lead us to give up praying that they would be saved.

In other words, our limited and sinful human reasoning might respond to the sovereignty of God by saying, "If God decides who will be saved and who won't, then why grieve over any who are lost, why desire for more to be saved, why pray in the face of God's eternal decrees?"

The Sovereignty of God and Compassion for the Lost

Paul knows about these dangers too. And I think he chooses the most effective means possible to guard us against these dangers. At the beginning of Romans 9 and at the end he shows us his heart. Now I urge you, don't let your own heart dictate what a compassionate person can believe about the sovereignty of God. Rather let the apostle show you what a person who believes in the sovereignty of God can and should really feel for the lost.

Look first at Romans 9:1–3.



The Apple of His Eye Mission Society

I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that 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 brethren, my kinsmen by race.

Then look at Romans 10:1.

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

So Paul begins and ends this chapter with tears for perishing Israel. And in so doing, he guards us against the psychological dangers of the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

Paul's Sorrow for Israel

First, in 9:2 he shows his sorrow for perishing Israel. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." It is wrong to say that those who believe in the sovereignty of God need not or should not feel grief over those who are perishing without Christ. If the doctrine has that effect on you, you do not believe it biblically.

Someone might say that this emotional outburst in Romans 9:1–3 is simply owing to Paul's volatile and inconsistent personality. But surely verse 1 proves that Paul's sorrow is far more significant than that: "I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit." In other words, "I regard my sorrow and my anguish over the lostness of my people to be so important that I will call God to bear witness to its authenticity."

And if he calls on the Holy Spirit to vouch for his conscience in this matter, then surely we must look upon this sorrow as a worthy affection, a spiritual emotion, and a godly grief. It is not merely the eruption of an unpredictable emotional volcano. It is the way a godly heart feels when it focuses on the misery of those who are perishing in unbelief.

And the point of verse 3 is to say that Paul's love for his perishing kinsmen is so real that if there were a universe in which a saint could save the perishing by becoming a hell-bound sinner, he would do it for Israel. His sorrow is real. The Holy Spirit is his witness. And therefore we need not, and dare not, be led by the doctrine of God's sovereignty to feel no sorrow for the perishing.

Paul's Longing for Their Conversion

Second, in Romans 10:1 Paul says that his heart's desire is that they may be saved. And so the second danger is averted, namely, the danger that we might be led to feel no longing for the conversion of the lost. Paul not only feels sorrow over the misery of the perishing. He feels longing that they might be saved. (The third danger—that we might not pray—we will take up next week.)

Four Reasons to Cultivate Paul's Heart for the Lost

Now the question before us is this: Should not our heart feel what Paul felt? Should we not grieve over the misery of the lost—especially over our kinsmen? Should we not have the same desire for their salvation that Paul had? Should we not look upon the people at our workplaces with a mixture of sorrow



for their condition and longing for their conversion? Can we claim to be biblical Christians if, day in and day out, we work and eat and laugh with unbelievers and feel none of these things?

I think that most of us probably want to have a heart like Paul's. And even though the awakening of that desire is the work of the Holy Spirit, it may be that he would use his Word today to that end. So let me mention four reasons why it is fitting for us who believe in the sovereignty of God to feel this sorrow and this longing. And then I will close with several practical steps we can take to cultivate this kind of heart.

1. Because the Secret Things Belong to God

First, we should feel desire for the salvation of the perishing because of Deuteronomy 29:29.

The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Who, among your family and associates, will God call and justify and glorify? That is a secret in the counsel of God. It belongs to him alone. We are meddling with God's prerogatives when we try to aim our desires at the elect. The secret things belong to the Lord, but the things that are revealed belong to us.

And what is that? The commands and promises of the Lord. "Love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). "Do good to one another and to all men" (1 Thessalonians 5:15). "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life without price" (Revelation 22:17). "All who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). The things that are revealed belong to us that we may do all the words of this law. Whatever you do, don't draw inferences from doctrines that contradict the commandments of Scripture. And we are commanded: "Love your enemies. Pray for them!"

2. Because God Takes No Pleasure in Their Death

Second, we should feel desire for the conversion of the perishing because God himself, when he contemplates the death of the unbelieving in and of itself, takes no pleasure in it. Ezekiel 18:23, "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" And then verse 32, "I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord God; so turn, and live."

Surely if God, in whose hands are the issues of life and death, can look upon the perishing in such a way that he grieves over their destruction, we too should feel the sorrow and longing that Paul felt.

3. Because They Were Made in the Image of God

Third, we should feel a desire for the salvation of the unbelieving because they were made in the image of God and their potential to live for his glory is there as long as they live on the earth. It is a far greater tragedy when a person dies without Christ than when a dog dies without Christ. When a person dies without Christ, the potential of the image of God is gone forever. All the glory that could



have been will never be. If they had only believed, they could have shone like the sun in the kingdom of God. And while they live, they may yet believe. And O how we should desire it! That the image of God might shine to his glory!

4. Because Our Own Salvation Is an Undeserved Gift

Fourth, we must feel compassion for the perishing and a longing for their conversion because our own salvation is such a precious undeserved gift. Surely it is unthinkable that we should be drug from the bottom of the lake, resuscitated at the cost of another's life, handed the instruments of rescue, and then just sit down and play cards on the beach while others are drowning. Is that not unthinkable in your own life?

And did Jesus not tell a parable about a servant who was treated with immense mercy but then refused to show compassion for his fellow servant (Matthew 18:23–35)? How can we feel the wonder of having been rescued freely by Christ, and then not live for the rescue of others? Surely there would be something ominous and fearful in such an inconsistency!

Seven Practical Steps toward a Heart like Paul's

And so we turn now to ask the practical question: How can we cultivate a heart like Paul's heart? Are there any steps that we can take to get to the point of saying, "My heart's desire for them is that they may be saved"? I think there are.

1. Never Forget the Plight

Never forget that people who do not obey Christ forfeit eternal life and go out into eternity under the wrath of God. John 3:36, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him."

Ask yourself questions like, "If I knew that a plague was coming and I knew that my colleague had not received the vaccination to protect himself, would I not inquire why she refused? Would I not seek to persuade her that she should choose life?" Ask yourself what you would say at the judgment day if your unbelieving friend turns to you and asks you why you didn't speak to him with more seriousness about this matter of eternal life.

In other words, keep before your mind the terrible reality of entering eternity without Christ.

2. Meditate on Christ's Sufficiency

Meditate often on the complete sufficiency of death of Christ to cover the sins of absolutely anyone who repents and believes in him. Constantly be exalting Christ in your own heart for the super-abundant grace that comes to us in his cross. Remind yourself again and again for the sake of your relatives and associates that the obedience of Christ has accomplished justification and life for all who believe, no matter how many sins they had committed before. Glory in the work of the cross for yourself, and you will begin to glory in it for others.



The Apple of His Eye Mission Society

Think often on Paul's own testimony in 1 Timothy 1:15–16,

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

God saved the worst first to show us that there is hope for the rest, even if we think they are too evil.

3. Meditate on the Spirit's Convicting and Drawing Power

As you ponder the sufficiency and efficiency of the cross to cover the sins of all who believe, think also on the power of the Holy Spirit to convict sinners and draw them to the Savior (John 16:8; 6:44). Don't let yourself sink into a pessimistic frame of mind that says, "Sure, God can forgive all who believe, but they are so hard and indifferent that they will never believe."

Preach to yourself that these are the days of the New Covenant. The blood of the eternal covenant has been shed. The Holy Spirit is being poured out on all flesh. And the New Covenant promise of God is this:

I will...put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes.

Don't say fatalistically, "Well conversion is in the hands of God. If he wants to save, let him save." Rather say, "My heart's desire is that they might be saved! And O there is hope for the hardest and coldest sinner, for conversion is in the hands of God! "O Lord grant that they would repent and come to know the truth!" (2 Timothy 2:25–26).

Don't be pessimistic about the power of God to change sinners. When John Wesley arrived in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in May, 1742, he wrote these memorable words: "I was surprised; so much drunkenness, cursing and swearing (even from the mouths of little children) do I never remember to have seen and heard before in so small a compass of time. Surely this place is ripe for Him who 'came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'" And God honored this kind of bold expectancy. So preach to yourself the power of God to convict sinners.

4. Think of Your Joy at the Conversion of One Lost Soul

Think of the joy you would have over one sinner who repents and turns to Christ through your prayer and witness. Paul called his converts his "hope and joy and crown of boasting before the Lord at his coming" (1 Thessalonians 2:19). And John said, "No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth" (3 John 4). Let your imagination grasp the joy of being used by God to bring a person from death to eternal life.

5. Think of God's Amazing Grace to You in Christ



Think often of how free and undeserved was the grace of God that brought you to Christ. It may have been in a parent, or a friend, or a pastor, or an evangelist, or a book. But whatever it was, you didn't deserve it. Your spiritual awakening and conviction for sin and grasp of the gospel and submission to Christ were the free gifts of God's grace.

The more you see how free and undeserving God's work in your own life has been, the more you will feel that your own grace and compassion must be free to others, without respect to their worthiness. "Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us" (Ephesians 5:2). When your basket is full of food that you didn't earn, and others are starving all around you, the heart says, "Freely you received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8; cf. 2 Kings 7:9).

6. Act on Your Loving Desires

Act on whatever loving desire you already have. I know from experience how difficult it is to know if you really love someone. Do I really care about the lost? Is my prayer a sham? Do I really desire that they be saved? These are good and honest questions that we have all asked. But how can they be answered? Our hearts and motives are so deceptive.

1 John 3:18–19 gives an answer.

Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us.

In other words, if we don't just talk about caring for others but actually take steps to show that care, our confidence in God that we are genuine and authentic when we speak of compassion will grow. Acting on the desire that you do have will cause the genuineness of your desires to increase.

7. Pray for God to Increase Your Love for the Lost

Finally, pray that God would cause your love for the lost to abound. Listen to the apostle's prayer for us in 1 Thessalonians 3:12, "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men." Love to all men is a work of God in our hearts. It is not natural to us. It is a gift of grace. Could it be that we have not because we ask not?

The Week of Prayer

And so here we are on the brink of a week of prayer. In view of Romans 10:1 don't you agree that we are in need of an unusual work of God? I am pleading with you to make this an unusual week in your life. A week of extraordinary prayer. I am begging you as a needy minister of the Word: please give yourself to extraordinary prayer this week for an unusual work of God.

© Desiring God

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of



The Apple of His Eye Mission Society

reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by Desiring God.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: www.desiringGod.org. Email: mail@desiringGod.org. Toll Free: 1.888.346.4700.



The Apple of His Eye Mission Society

For More Information

For more information about this resource, please feel free to contact us at:

The Apple of His Eye Mission Society
PO Box 1649
Brentwood, TN 37024-1649
(888) 512-7753
info@appleofhiseye.org

For additional resources, please visit our website at www.appleofhiseye.org.