



As we heard at the end of Romans 8 last week:

For neither despair nor depression, neither the tendency to hoard nor those unable to make this broken system work for them, neither addiction nor self-control, neither those quite happy nor those unable to find meaning in life – nor anything else in all creation – will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Saviour.

For God loves you, and there is nothing you can do about it.

There is nothing of this life that makes God's love grow, diminish, stop or change in any way. There's no more divine attention in times of worry, nor less in moments of joy. God doesn't reward perfect giving, living, or loving. God is the unchangeable constant. Like gravity that holds us to the earth, we are grounded in this presence, even while knowing there are times we break away from it. Moments of separation might occur, but God is forever faithful.

Paul describes the divine love he knows so well in his letter to the Romans. In remembering his time as a Pharisee, he followed his faith where it led, and God was there. In the transformative experience with the divine that sent him down a new path, so too, God was there. It's a relationship that he's come to trust, and wants nothing more than others to experience the same. Through prayer and service he's grown to better understand God's love

for him, and the call to share the happiness he's found. But if you were to open to the beginning of Romans 9, just a few verses before today's reading, Paul isn't happy. For in verse two, Paul describes the

²...great sadness and constant pain in [his] heart. [Paul goes on to...] ³ wish [he] could be cursed, cut off from Christ if it helped [his] brothers and sisters, who are [his] flesh-and-blood relatives.

For chapter 9 and in the chapters that follow, Paul is devastated that so many of his family, his friends, his Jewish sisters and brothers are not experiencing the same faith journey that he is.



There's a caution here before I get farther, because this text and the chapters that follow have too often been used as a criticism towards the Jews that did not follow Jesus. Paul's words have been twisted to imply that that they're somehow missing out, that God's relationship with Israel was the *old* testament and Jesus' relationship replaces it with something *new*. There's danger when we believe in that replacement, because it attributes a fickleness to God's attention span. That God can just *choose* to ignore us and move on.

Instead, Paul speaks to the relevance of both communities, saying ⁶...*it's not as though God's word has failed*. It's not as if Jesus' presence eliminates God's promise to Israel. It's not as if the offshoot of this path cause the other to cease to exist. Instead, God is calling everybody...that there are the chosen, and there are more chosen, and the more chosen, each invited to discover the divine.

So, Paul merely is mourning his friends and family have not followed him down the same path, as Mary Beth Anton reflects, that

“[w]hen 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...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.” from [Feasting on the Word](#).

We’ve all been there when our family and friends don’t come to church. We tried, we brought them when they were younger, we hoped that like good habits like brushing your teeth before bed and clean clothes in the morning, that church would be included in the list of habits that keep people feeling healthy and well. Like Paul, we just wanted to share an experience, and we mourned when it stopped. Post pandemic, a lot more people stopped coming, making our grief greater. But long before COVID plenty of reasons arose both inside and outside of the church, why our journeys were no longer together.¹



In an article in *The Atlantic*, Jack Meador refers to a book describing our current era as *The Great Dechurching*², as “religious abuse and more general corruption in churches have driven people away.” But Meador’s belief is that it’s not the whole story. While speaking about America specifically, certainly many of this applies to us, as

the thought of going to church on Sunday carries a certain mental burden with it—you might want to go, but you also dread the inevitable questions about where you have been. “I skipped church to go to brunch with a friend” or “I was just too tired to come” don’t sound like convincing excuses as you rehearse the conversation in your mind. Soon it actually sounds like it’d be harder to attend than to skip, even if some part of you still

¹ <https://12ft.io/proxy?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theatlantic.com%2Fideas%2Farchive%2F2023%2F07%2Fchristian-church-community-participation-drop%2F674843%2F>

² <https://www.amazon.ca/Great-Dechurching-Leaving-Going-Bring/dp/0310147433>

Financial and spiritual care will be offered to those suffering, food and belonging, all resting on the understanding that this is not how the world gives.

This is another way to live, that stands in opposition to the workism related beliefs that lift up self-made millionaires as their prophets. No one is self-made. They're a myth, in the words of Arnold Schwarzenegger, that make us discount every person that helps, those that give advice, those that make an effort, those that lift us up when we fall.⁴ Paul has found a community that resists our self-made tendencies. And without getting too much in the head of a two thousand dead minister to the early church – these words of Romans chapters 9 and following, detail Paul's reaction to the Judaism of which he was a part. He was charged with institutional maintenance, keeping those in that fit, and those that didn't out. Politics played as much of a role as faith did. Religiosity was more important than relationship. And so Paul left, even as his heart broke to do so.

But the community he found was able to offer him another way to live. For his sorrows resonated with the people of the time who like him, abandoned fishing nets and other familial connections to a group that looked after one another in a tangible, heartfelt way. They worried about the physical, the mental, *and* the spiritual wellbeing of those God has called alongside them. They practiced compassion and forgiveness beyond any rational, reasonable transactional way – only because the one they followed forgave his crucifiers from the cross, healed people and told them not to tell others, fed others and require that they put anything in the plate. Paul's newfound community is one that offered another way to live.

How much of this still applies today? Are we offering a new way to live that addresses a world obsessed with self-preservation and self-aggrandizement?



⁴ <https://www.upworthy.com/arnold-schwarzenegger-s-speech-on-why-he-s-not-a-self-made-man-shows-why-we-all-need-each-other>

When things go back to normal this fall, and we go back to our respective churches, I want you to remember this time. We are meant to be together. And I don't mean amalgamating our churches or anything like that, I mean the seeing one another not by the divisions between us – but that which unites us, everybody in this collective hope that is ours to share. I want you to remember this unconditional love and acceptance that didn't check memberships, which brought along a mutual awkwardness in each of our churches when we saw some people sitting in *our* seats, but just as quickly as those feelings came they were replaced by gratitude to see new faces, especially as we reconnected over food and fellowship.

What has happened here must happen everywhere as community continues to evolve around us. We don't need a blazing fire to carry back, just a spark. As Christianity changes and declines in the west, it's easy to let politics and obsessions with self-preservation take over the call that has been put before us. It's easy to mourn that which we've lost. It's easy to make it us vs. them. Instead, God is interested in everybody.



Forever relying on God

This God that calls one, calls all. From long before Paul up to now, our faith relies upon our God who seeks those with courage enough to embrace a life that offers something different to the world around it. For we rely on God to model this ever growing chosen people, who leads us and loves us and connects us with those who need us as much as we need them, who inspires us to sing from the mountaintops with a faith we want to pass on.

For we are a part of ***a community that through its preaching and living bears witness to another way to live.***

Thanks be to God.