

A Godly Sorrow for the Lost

By Marco Scouvert



There are 8.2 billion people in the world. According to the *2025 International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 2.65 billion claim to be Christians — only 32.3%. That number incorporates four main groups who identify as Catholic (1.27B), Orthodox (0.29B), Evangelical (0.42B), and Pentecostal/Charismatic (0.67B). It is hard to be sure but based on these numbers and my adjusted estimations I'd say around 10%, at most, of the world's population are genuine followers of Jesus. This is a very small remnant of humanity. That means nine out of every ten people

are without Christ, under the condemnation of God, and heading for his everlasting wrath.

The Reality of a Godly Sorrow for the Lost

Twenty-five years after Jesus ascended to heaven, an even more lamentable situation was true about the nation of Israel. They were uniquely favored as God's chosen people and as such they enjoyed special privileges that no other nation experienced (Romans 9:4-5). In spite of these blessings, only a small minority of ethnic Jews received the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth (Romans 9:27-33; 11:1-5). The vast majority of Israelites rejected him and were accursed of God (Romans 9:3).

This reality broke Paul's heart: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" (Romans 9:2). Though Paul knew that this was ultimately God's sovereign plan, at the core of his being he was still tremendously grieved and continually pained over the spiritual state of his fellow Jews because he loved them and wanted their best.

Paul's response embodied the love of God for rebellious Israel. When Israel was deep into idolatry and Yahweh's judgment loomed, the Lord passionately pled with them through the prophet Ezekiel to repent of their sins and be saved because he took "no pleasure in the death of anyone" (Ezekiel 18:30-32). Paul's reaction also reflected the affection of Jesus toward the Jews who rejected him. When he considered the judgment of God that would come upon Jerusalem "he wept over it" and lamented, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace!" (Luke 19:41-44).

Likewise, because we love unsaved people we experience some degree of heartache when we think that they are under the wrath of God and heading for a Christless eternity. The judgment that Jesus poured out on unbelieving Israel in 70 A.D. is a microcosm of the future global destruction that will consume the cosmos and all those who reject Christ. Perhaps you have had similar experiences as you've contemplated and lamented the spiritual condition and future ruin of your family members, classmates, coworkers, and neighbors apart from Jesus.

The Results of a Godly Sorrow for the Lost

As Paul contemplated the present unbelief of his fellow Israelites and the future suffering they would endure, his grief led him to two things. First, he earnestly asked God to save them: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1).

When you consider that unbelievers are enslaved to their sin, both unable and unwilling to come to Jesus without God first drawing them, it will move you to ask him to graciously do so. Know that God does not always answer such prayers as quickly as we would like. Sometimes he wants us to persevere in asking for the salvation of the lost. George Müller prayed daily for the conversion of five people. The first was converted after 18 months, the second after 7 years, and the third after 12 years. The last two remained unsaved at the time of Müller's death, 52 years later. But they were converted to Christ a few years after that! May God strengthen us, like Müller, to persevere in prayer for the lost and not lose heart.

Second, Paul desired that he himself could be condemned by God if it meant his fellow ethnic Jews might be saved by it. "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3). A chapter earlier Paul had just said that no one can condemn a believer in Jesus or separate him from God's love (Romans 8:1; 38-39). But his love for Israelites and his desire for them to be saved was so strong that if it were possible he was willing to trade places with them and be put back under the curse of God and separated from Jesus, if only it would lead to their rescue.

But he couldn't. Neither could Moses when he asked God to kill him in order to atone for the sin of Israel (Exodus 32:30-33). And here we see the unique beauty of Jesus. He not only desired the salvation of lost sinners. He was not only willing to offer himself as their substitute. He came and died for condemned sinners, making atonement for their sins and securing everlasting redemption for all who trust in him.

Our lives can never qualify as acceptable sacrifices to God to cover anyone's sin. Nevertheless, our hearts should break with godly sorrow for unbelievers around us. And our longing for their salvation ought to be so strong that we will do whatever we can to be the means by which they are moved to believe in Jesus who is able to rescue them. We should take Spurgeon's exhortation to heart: "If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let no one go unwarned and unprayed for."

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