

I want us to worship God in a special way this summer. I want us to think about the doctrine of election. Please don't run. These sermons are an invitation to go deep into the mystery and majesty of God.

I promise not to be argumentative. I promise not to belittle people I disagree with. I promise to say what you don't expect me to say, and I promise to allow God Himself and not what I say about God to be the mystery.

The sermon today sets the tone of these sermons. Here's the idea that sets the tone. Faced with the mystery and majesty of divine election knowledge puffs up; love builds up. In saying that I am taking my cue from the Apostle Paul.

A New Look at Paul

Some people love to hate the Apostle Paul. They accuse him of demeaning women, of being quick to lose his temper, of corrupting Jesus' simple message, and of using improper language. Some accusations are false, and some are true. He was the kind of man who divided the room, when he walked in. You loved him, or you hated him. Don't form *your* opinion of him without giving Romans 9 a generous hearing. The opening verses tell you about the man, and they set the tone for my sermons on election.

They also come alive, when we read first the closing verses (38-39) of chapter eight. **Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** Nothing can separate us from the love of God. In Romans 9-11 Paul asks, "But what about my people, the Jews, the ones with all the God-given privileges, and through whom the ancestry of Jesus Himself is traced." Many of them have rejected the love of God in Christ Jesus. Has God's purpose for Israel failed? Has God given up on His chosen people?"

It wasn't a theoretical question. It gave Paul anguish. Verses 2-3: **I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.** That's the man who wrote these chapters. Paul didn't write about the doctrine of election to show how smart he was. He wrote about the people in the world he knew and loved best. He wrote to find relief for his aching heart.

Try to put yourself in Paul's place for a moment. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. He rose to the top of his class. He was on the fast track to a place of prominence within Judaism; and he gave it all up, when Christ called him to be an apostle.

But he didn't reject being Jewish. He embraced what he thought God brought Israel into existence to do. As a result he found himself at odds with the majority of Jews of his generation, and it broke his heart.

If we hear his grief behind every hard sentence, behind every perplexing idea in Romans 9-11, then the doctrine of election will become once again a life-giving power in the Church that teaches us to look for God in the most unpromising circumstances. The doctrine of election means that God comes barging into human life and making unmistakable contact with real people, and when He does that, anything can happen, because God is in control. He has a purpose, and He is going to see His purpose through, and the human mess will not thwart it.

The alternative is to hear the doctrine of election as a contentious curiosity, which we debate and then call people names, who think we are wrong. Paul's heart cry rebukes that curiosity. **I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for**

the sake of my brothers. Anguish like that reflects an understanding of the doctrine of election that is never academic and smarty-pants. Faced with the mystery and majesty of divine election knowledge puffs up; love builds up.

Do you care about the spiritual well being of people in your life the way Paul cared for his kinsmen? Who do you want to know God? If you and I spent the next decade praying for and winning the heart of one or two people that we care about, we could change the world. At least, we could change our world. We would certainly change their world.

Mrs. Atkinson's Sorrow

I need to tell you the story of Mrs. Atkinson. She illustrates the story of that costly love that needs to govern our thinking about the doctrine of election. I know her story because our families were stayed in the same church for decades. When you flit from church to church or just drop in on a Sunday morning, when you don't have anything else to do, you don't put down spiritual roots. You don't give yourself a chance to see what God does in other people's lives. You have to be with them to see that. You have to get to know them and endure with them year in and year out.

I didn't know Mrs. Atkinson well, but my mom and dad knew Mr. and Mrs. Atkinson. Mr. Atkinson never came to church. Mrs. Atkinson came, along with her son, Lee, and my mom told me, "Mr. Atkinson just doesn't come; he doesn't believe."

Well, year in and year out, I came to the church and worshiped with my mom and dad. Mrs. Atkinson was always there, and her boy, Lee, sat beside her. She came Sunday morning and Sunday night. Mr. Atkinson never showed up. Then, I got married, finished seminary, and went off to our first ministry, which was far from where I grew up. I didn't see much of the old church. But I'd go home from time to time, and sure enough, Mrs. Atkinson was there, and her boy, Lee, sat beside her, and Mr. Atkinson wasn't there.

I went home one year. My dad had died by then. Mom and I went to church. I looked up front and said, "Mom, is that Mrs. Atkinson sitting up front there." She was sitting where she always sat. She had sat there forever. Presbyterians are squatters, just like Baptists. She said, "Yes." And I said, "Who's the guy sitting with her?" "That's Mr. Atkinson." I said, "Mr. Atkinson! I didn't think he was a believer." She said, "Well, he is now. It took 25 years, but here he is."

What did Mrs. Atkinson go through for 25 years? I think she would understand what Paul wrote here in verse 2? **I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.** I don't know that she ever went as far as Paul did in verse 3: "**I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my husband.**" But I bet something inside her said, "I'd give up a lot to see my husband come to faith in Christ."

Do you ever feel like that about people who are close to you? You yearn for them to see the truth about Jesus. You yearn for them to stop keeping God at arm's length and come with you to BVBC and worship with you and believe with you. Have you gone on yearning for them for the better part of three decades? That yearning stains the doctrine of election with tears. If it doesn't, we can get all involved in heavy-duty theological matters and miss the most important thing. **I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.**

Israel's Persistent Privileges

I tell you the story of her costly love to help you remember that when faced with the mystery and majesty of divine election knowledge puffs up; love builds up. I think we are now ready to step into some of the mystery of the doctrine of election.

When we look at the verses that start in the middle of verse four, we begin to understand the grief Paul felt for the people he knew and loved best. He describes **the people of Israel** this way: **Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs and from them is traced the ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised. Amen.**

What a pedigree! Can you imagine? **Theirs is the adoption as sons!** They are the ones of whom Moses said: **The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession** – Deuteronomy 7:6.

Theirs, he says, is the divine glory. They had a clearer picture of the true God than anyone else on the face of the earth. Theirs was the temple, the dwelling place of God on earth. They had received the covenants: the covenant with Abraham, with Moses, and with David, and there was also Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant. All of that belonged to Israel, and the story of it has been preserved in what we call the Old Testament and what Jews call the Torah.

And from them is traced the ancestry of Christ. The gospels of Matthew and Luke trace it, and it's a genealogy you won't find on Ancestry.com. You could make the argument that the chief purpose for which God made Israel was to provide the human pathway along which the Son of God would come into our world.

All that was theirs, and they missed the meaning. It's as if a flower grew and grew, and when it was ready to bloom, the stalk said to the blossom, "I don't want you." Not all but so many Jews of Paul's generation turned away from Jesus and refused Him as the long-expected Messiah of Israel.

It's not so much that Paul's flesh and blood turned away from Jesus. His flesh and blood were the elect, the chosen people of God. The elect were turning away from Jesus. Paul was not feeling disappointment so much as he was facing a theological problem so big that I think it shook him to his core. How can God's elect turn away from the eternal purpose of their election?

That's why he had great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart for his brothers. That's what moved him to say, **I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race.** It made Paul consider the unthinkable: did the Word of God fail? which is another way of asking: Did God fail? Romans 9-11 gives Paul's answer to that question. It takes us deep into the mystery and majesty of the doctrine of election. We don't want to go there without love.

Jesus Wept

What do you think are the chances that in the next 100 days you will go at it hammer and tongs with someone over a hot-button political or religious issue? There are plenty of them around: gay marriage, Israel and the Palestinians, creation and evolution, Obamacare, immigration, the national debt, the doctrine of election, and I could go on. People become passionate about these matters. They get angry, their blood pressure goes up, their perspire, they raise their voices, they say things they later regret.

You will hear ideas about Romans 9-11 that may rouse your emotions. You may be surprised at how strongly you feel about ideas posed by Calvinists and Arminians and Premillennialists and Zionists and PLO sympathizers and people like your Senior Pastor, who resolutely refuses to be labeled.

My dream is not a BVBC where people don't care about big issues but a BVBC where we care as much for the people we disagree with as we care for the issues we disagree about. My dream is not a BVBC that has no convictions about the great issues that trouble our world but a BVBC that is knowledgeable and passionate and articulate about those convictions, and who would make great sacrifices for the people we disagree with most sharply.

Our model is the Apostle. **I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.**

Our even greater Model is Jesus Christ, who looked out on the city that held Him increasingly and lethally at arm's length and said: **"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing"** – Luke 13:34.

Faced with the mystery and majesty of the doctrine of election, knowledge puffs up; love builds up. The apostle has framed the explosive issues of election, Israel, and everlasting life in such a way that we must never discuss them to win an argument but to win the people we love to an ultimate devotion to Jesus Christ. Let's be such a church.