



# 2023 Weekly Devotions

Week of: July 24<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup>

Sermon: July 23<sup>rd</sup>



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH  
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July 24

**Romans 9:1-5; 10:1-4**

When you stop to consider all that Paul endured at the hands of the Jews, you wonder how he could have any affection for them at all. From the very outset of his conversion and ministry, they were intent on killing him (Acts 9:29). I bring this up because after a long and arduous journey to get to Rome to plant and/or encourage the church, the first attempt at ministry is, as it always was in his life, to go to the Jews first (Acts 28:17). His strategy was always to begin with the Jews. There are a number of reasons for this approach, but beneath it all is a genuine love for "his" people.

The book of Romans, penned by Paul, is the most doctrinally rich book of the Bible. In the midst of the deep biblical truth is evidence of a heart for the Jews as well. In Romans 9:2-3 he writes, "I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." He is referring to the Jews of which he is one. A bit later in chapter 10:1 he continues, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is their salvation." He loves the Jewish community because he has always been a part of it and because of his kinship to them, he yearns that they be saved by realizing Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all of their Scriptures.

You see, Paul can look past the reality of their sin to the deepest needs of the heart. Even when it causes him to suffer, he is still able to remind himself that they are simply lost. Dear ones, do you ever stop and consider that people act the way they do because they are blind to the truth of God's Word and ignorant to spiritual realities? The only hope they have is that God would remove the scales from their eyes so that they would see the beauty and value of Christ. We live in a culture where people are so angry with each other. The unfortunate part is that we, the Christians, are the ones with the answer and yet, are too often just as mean, angry, and contentious as lost people. It makes sense to me that lost people don't understand what the solution is, but we should know better.

The apostle Paul endured such hostility and hatred because he knew with all of his heart that if they could just believe in Jesus as the Messiah, sanctification would begin, and he would gain a brother or sister in Christ. This new believer would no longer be an enemy but a friend. Not only that, but Paul believed in a literal heaven and hell. When he looked at another person, especially someone he cared for, the thought of them spending an eternity in the torment of hell, drove him to share the gospel and to try to be persuasive in his efforts to convert them to Christ.

Folks, when you look at your children, your siblings, your friends, and neighbors, pray that God would give you a heart for them and that the thought of them going to hell would drive you to at least try to share your faith, both in word and deed, that they might come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. The media has done a great job of causing people to literally hate each other. This hatred leads us to not only keep the good news of Jesus to ourselves, but it causes us not to even care about the people around us. They are not seen as souls to be won, but enemies to be avoided and even destroyed. That may be okay for the lost world we live in, but it is not okay for Christians to have such ungodly attitudes. Paul did not, even though he had good reason. May we try too.

July 25

**Acts 28:20; Job 19:26; Daniel 12:2**

Paul tells the Jews that he is wearing chains not because he is guilty of any crime against the Jewish nation or people. He tells them that the Romans found him innocent on several occasions and that he only stood before them now because of the need to defend himself. I think it is telling and worth noting that at no point in time did Paul go on the offensive to try to tear Israel or the Jews down. He only hoped that they would finish their spiritual journey through Judaism and come to Christ as the completion of the Law and their faith. Paul was defending himself as a Messianic Jew. That simply means that he was a Jew who had come to believe in Jesus.

The problem that he faced was the "many" who did not believe in Jesus. They saw both Jesus and Paul as threats to their faith and religion, not as the next step or completion of it. For them, they were right, and Paul was wrong. They viewed him as a heretic and an unbeliever who disregarded their Law and the Scriptures as they understood them. Paul states clearly the reason for his imprisonment and constant persecution was the "hope of Israel" (Acts 28:20). He believes this is why he is in chains so let's consider what is this hope to which he refers.

Back in Acts 23:6 it was written, "...I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" So, not only was the life of Christ problematic to the Jews, the resurrection was as well. The hope of Israel was both the Messiah and resurrection. At the beginning of Acts 28:20, Paul said, "For this reason...." He is on trial because he was preaching Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's hope. You might recall that as he preached on Mars Hill in Athens he was accused of preaching Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18). Paul always preached this because it was always the hope of Israel. At a time when there should have been great rejoicing and celebration over fulfilled prophecy, there was only blindness and rejection of Christ.

The Jews would have known the hope to which Paul is speaking because of the Old Testament Scriptures. In Daniel 12:2 it is written, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt." You see, within their own writings was the hope of resurrection. Job said, "Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:26). Then there is of course the well-known passage from the book of Ezekiel. In chapter 37 it says, "Behold, I will open the graves and cause you to come up out of your graves...." (Ezek. 37:11-13). The Israelites should have known that their Scriptures held the hope of resurrection and that Christ's life, death, burial, and resurrection were all in perfect accord with the Scriptures.

Think for a moment how absurd it was for Paul to be in chains simply for preaching constantly and consistently the truth of the Scriptures fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. I find great encouragement and instruction from the way Paul preached. He preached lovingly. We could say thoughtfully as he went to his kinsmen first so as not to offend unnecessarily. He preached doctrinally sound. All that he preached aligned with the Word of God. He preached boldly in that he did not back down nor water down the message. Dear ones, you can preach boldly when you are preaching doctrinal truth with loving compassion. Paul did it well, may we follow this pattern.

July 26

**Acts 17:32-34**

It is helpful for us to always remember that Paul had a strategy in his evangelistic approach. As mentioned earlier, he started with the Jewish community and then worked into the Gentile communities. He also targeted cities, seaports, and heavily traveled areas of commerce and business. Paul knew it was wise to train others for the work of ministry so as to multiply his efforts and expand the kingdom at a faster pace. He knew church planting and pastoral development were key to kingdom growth by reaching the nations. I say all of this because I want you to know that Paul was serious, focused, and strategic in his work as a missionary.

With all of that being true and with all of his expert abilities, the truth remains that the work was hard, slow, and often disrespected and rejected. In our passage from Sunday, we read again that after all of his effort and teaching, there were still some who simply would not believe the truth of the gospel message. Praise God that there were also those who were coming to faith in Christ and being saved (Acts 28:24). You can find the same results in Acts 17 where Paul preached at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17). Luke recorded, "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, others said they would listen later. But some men joined him and believed" (Acts 17:32, 34). It is always true that the responses to the gospel will be varied and include believers, mockers, and those who just aren't sure.

Church family, this is certainly in keeping with the same responses that Jesus Christ experienced Himself. He was undoubtedly the greatest teacher to ever live and yet some rejected His teaching and would not believe too. My hope is that you will be encouraged today as you think of times when you may have appeared to "fail" in your evangelistic efforts. Brothers and sisters, everybody experiences these same outcomes at various times. Do not be discouraged but keep on sharing Jesus because there will also be those who come to believe from your efforts too. You remain faithful to witnessing and leave the results to God.

Many are the reasons that exists for the truth mentioned above. One may view this from a negative perspective and focus only on the ones who will not believe. I encourage you today to spend your energy focusing on the reality that many will come to believe from your gospel witness as God uses you to share truth with others. It is meant to be encouraging to read that God's Word does not come back void and that our labor is not in vain. It is a wonderful truth that God gives us the privilege to partner with Him in kingdom work and that He will do the work of converting people through our witnessing and our testimony. Listen to these words, "So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). We get to be the "mouth" of God through whom His word goes forth.

Friends, it is helpful to know that sometimes the word goes out as judgment against people too. They are told and they reject. The blood is on their hands not yours. They are responsible, they are guilty, and they are without excuse. God is the One who determines the purpose for your testimony and witness. If Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul, and many others have experienced rejection, surely, we will too. Do not be dismayed or discouraged. Keep speaking and stand in awe of the amazing things God will do through folks like us. To Him be the glory.

July 27

### 1 Corinthians 3:6

Yesterday I could have utilized one of today's verses for our devotion. Paul wrote to the Corinthians this familiar verse, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6). I have found great peace in knowing that the burden of another person's salvation is not resting fully on my shoulders. God sovereignly decides to use many people in each person's conversion experience. You or I may be the one who drops the seed that will become the fruit of salvation, but never forget that many have gone before us who prepared the soil of that person's heart. Others will come along to water and fertilize the fragile seed that we planted, and even then, it will be up to God to provide growth if He so chooses.

I hope that this level of dependency upon God will become a source of hope and encouragement for you as you labor to see others come to faith in Christ. The loved ones that you are praying for are much better off in the hands of our great God than in their own hands. I am thankful that I don't have to get everything perfect in my efforts in order to see some people get saved. Think of your gardening efforts. I am sure there have been times when you have covered all the bases and followed good gardening techniques and for one reason or another, the plants just don't flourish. Then there are the times when you dropped some seed, walked away, and the next thing you know potatoes are growing or some other produce. It's a God thing!

I want to take us a little deeper into the workings of the Spirit now as we move from our responsibility to the hearers. Paul quotes a passage from the book of Isaiah as the book of Acts draws to a close. Paul had traveled a long way to reach these people and had suffered immensely on their behalf. Now, they didn't know that and didn't ask him to; however, his love for them and understanding that they needed Jesus drove him to them. Finally, as he declares the gospel to them, in chains, some simply walk away (Acts 28:25). He closes his discourse with them by declaring that God's sovereignty was about to close the door on them forever. He tells them that this salvation is being sent to the Gentiles and away from them in a declaration of finality.

This is a stark reminder and a hard pill for some people to swallow, but dear ones, there comes a time when God will hide or keep His truth from some people. The original passage given by the prophet Isaiah was delivered to a stiff-necked people who had continued to reject God and ignore His voice. As a result, God told Isaiah that He would render their hearts insensitive, their ears dull, their eyes dim, and their darkness would remain (Isa. 6:10). So, Paul utilizes this Old Testament passage to declare the same fate over the Jews who walked away and rejected their God again.

Jesus spoke to the crowds from the same passage back in John 12. I will write more on this tomorrow but for now it is important to note that He too wanted the people to know that His mercy and grace was for a season. He would not always extend opportunities for salvation and that it was important that people take advantage of the light while they have it (John 12:35). The point that was being made in the gospel of John was that there was ample evidence and opportunity for people to believe and yet they chose not to believe (John 12:37). The day would come when those evidences and opportunities would cease and their "day of salvation" would be past. This dear ones is an incredibly sobering and even frightening truth. If a person keeps playing games with God, keeps thinking they have endless amounts of time and chances, they are sorely mistaken and may well be left outside the gate with no oil in their lamps or means to enter. Don't let that be you.

July 28

**John 12:35-39**

Today's point to ponder is one that I am convinced without a shadow of a doubt is biblically true and right. I only start this way because I also know that it is one that some folks just don't like to think about or simply will not allow themselves to consider as true. I am going to write today about the sovereignty of God in conversion. The hard truth that needs to be accepted is that God does indeed harden the heart and chooses not to work salvifically in some lives. Let me say once again that pastor Aaron and I both believe that God moves first in any person's salvation. By that we mean that He first regenerates the heart and then a person is able to respond by faith to Christ. This is what Ezekiel was writing about in Ezekiel 36:26. A spiritually dead person does not exercise faith before God regenerates the heart. The heart is regenerated solely by the sovereign work of God.

Now, please note that He does not prevent a person from believing at first. He does not work against a soul who desires to know Him nor does He prevent anyone from coming to Him who wants to. The reality is that all God has to do is leave a person to their own desires, wishes, and wants, and they will choose freely to remain in their current state. It is His grace that calls people unto Him not meanness that keeps them away.

According to our passage from today, John 12:35-39, which is referenced in Sunday's passage, the people willfully and consistently rejected all the truth provided them as well as the ample signs and wonders performed before them. John wrote this, "But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him" (John 12:37). In some ways, Jesus was laboring to prove Himself to them and Paul was laboring to prove Him to them as well. In both cases, the results were the same – the people rejected the truth of Scripture and the evidence in front of them. From a practical standpoint, what was God to do?

The question asked from Isaiah and quoted in John 12 was this, "The arm of the Lord has been revealed. Who has believed our report" (John 12:38)? Before I tell you what happened next, please understand that this decision to disbelieve Jesus was a continual rejection. This was not a one-time moment. The Greek grammar reveals a continual action. Over and over and over again they had opportunity and simply rejected the truth. This of course reveals the condition of their hearts. Now here comes the tough part in verse 39. There it is written, "For this reason they could not believe." Folks, I can't let you miss this gut-wrenching truth. There was a time in their lives when they didn't believe (v. 37). Then came the time when they couldn't believe (v. 39). They had rejected God so many times that He sealed their fates, and they no longer had the opportunity to believe. They went from didn't believe to couldn't believe and we must not think that doesn't still happen.

You cannot get around the fact that it is God who hardened their hearts, but it was their own choices that made their hearts hard in the first place. It was God who blinded their eyes so they would not see His gracious hand anymore. It was God who determined He had waited long enough, and they had clearly and finally made their decision to reject Him. He simply froze them in the condition in which they had lived for so long. Keep in mind dear ones, this is not the poor soul who simply doesn't get it yet. This is the arrogant, haughty, know it all who laughs at and mocks the very mention of His name or His ways. He is the Pharaoh who thinks he is God. He is Lucifer who wanted to be God and refuse to humbly bow the knee to Him. Our God is good, gracious, long suffering, and slow to anger. He does not delight in punishing even the wicked – BUT HE WILL! Get right with God while you have the chance.

July 29

**Romans 9:17-25; 11:17-31**

Based on yesterday's point to ponder, you might walk away believing that God is forever finished with the Israelites and has closed the door on any hope of salvation. That would be an incorrect conclusion. Undoubtedly, many will be lost because of their unbelief and rejection of Christ, but we should know that God is not finished yet. As a matter of fact, we are the beneficiaries of their unbelief. Paul wrote extensively on this subject in Romans 9 through 11.

Beloved, these chapters in the book of Romans are often skipped by pastors who believe their congregations can't handle the depth of these truths or they themselves simply choose not to believe these doctrinal truths. I believe that our people at Smyrna are maturing and learning to enjoy the "meat" of God's Word. Milk is good and necessary for a season in everyone's life, but there comes a time when we must grow and develop the ability to eat more substantial foods that will cause us to grow healthier (Hebrews 5:12-13). The passages for today are such meat.

All of what I write today stems from the teaching that God chose to harden the hearts of the Jews who continually rejected Him as we saw in Acts 28. This reality was stated by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 6 and utilized by Jesus in John 12. It is a warning passage to encourage us to use the time and knowledge that we have to follow Christ as Lord when His grace is extended to us. It is also a passage that for me, brings understanding as to why some simply will not believe. This does not make me angry with God nor does it cause me to doubt His goodness or His love. I am comfortable with the reality that He is the potter and creation, including humanity, is the clay. As the potter, He has the right to do whatever He so chooses with His clay. God sovereignly and wisely creates all of creation for His glory. Some will bring Him glory and reveal His nature through obedience and some will do so through their rejection of Him. Paul wrote, "What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy" (Romans 9:22-23)? He did this among both the Jews and the Gentiles.

In Romans 9, Paul explains that God grafted in you and me as Gentiles into His family because the Jews rejected Christ and pursued a righteousness of their own apart from Christ (Rom. 9:30-32). Romans 10:1-4 is a good passage for you to look at regarding Christ as the end of the law of righteousness to everyone who believes. They were intent on keeping the Law as legalists but failed to see that the entire Law pointed to Jesus as its fulfillment. In their rejection of Christ, the door was opened for non-Jews to enter in by faith. Paul wrote, "By their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:11b). We are warned firmly not to become conceited or to look down upon the Jews for the day will come when God will restore His remnant and as we have been blessed by their disobedience how much more by their obedience (Rom. 11:12-15).

As the book of Acts ends, Paul spoke of the hardening that was taking place among the Jews. But he explains further in Romans with these words, "...that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25). God made a covenant with Abraham, and we know that He is a covenant keeping God. He will see to it that Israel is restored and, in the meantime, we must take advantage of the "day of our salvation" too. I hope that you will see the mercy of God extended here and the wisdom in His sovereignty. There are indeed truths that are hard to grasp fully, but it is in those places that we rest in the goodness of God. When you know Him, that is easy to do.



July 30

**John 17:3**

The Bible explains to us that eternal life is “knowing God” (John 17:3). John wrote it this way, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Many people claim to know God, but a cursory conversation will reveal that He is a god of their own imaginations. Dear ones, the only way to know God is through the revelation of Himself to us. He wants us to know Him and has chosen to reveal Himself to us through various means. The incarnation of Christ is the most obvious way that God revealed Himself to us (John 14:9), and that is most completely explained and fleshed out through the revelation of His infallible Word. The Word is illuminated to us by His Holy Spirit’s work in us. Of course, we know that creation tells of some of His attributes and ways too (Ps. 19), but without the Scriptures and the Spirit to provide special revelation, we cannot fully know God.

I write on this subject briefly today because I want to emphasize His desire that we know Him. A difficult and often rejected way that God reveals truth about His nature and character is through the presence of evil and sin. We could never fully understand the mercy, grace, wrath, justice, and love of God if those things did not exist. I mentioned yesterday that God created some vessels of wrath so that He could demonstrate the depths of His glory to vessels of mercy (Romans 9:23). God wants us to know Him accurately. Apart from divine revelation, it really does not matter one iota what you think about God. It doesn’t matter if you think He is mean, unfair, unjust or anything else. The only thing that matters is what He reveals about Himself because that will be truth whereas much of what humanity thinks is bogus and useless. God knows what it takes for you to know Him and He knows that knowing Him truthfully leads to eternal life.

If we consider God’s desire to make Himself known to us more fully, then we begin to understand why Paul chose to quote Exodus 9:16 in Romans 9:17. He did it to show the reason why God exercised His freedom in hardening as well as in mercy: “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’” This is another way of saying that God chose to do this with Pharaoh in order to reveal more truth about Himself to us. Displays of hardening led to mercy.

He chose a verse that expressed the very purpose that relates implicitly to the righteousness of God and the hope of the world: namely, God’s commitment to uphold and display the honor of His name — “that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” In other words, God’s freedom in mercy and hardening is at the heart of God’s glory and God’s name. It is God’s purpose for the whole earth. He will reveal it to the whole earth because it is good for humanity. His greatest gift to us, apart from Christ, is to know Him. There is infinite worth in His name and His glory. He is our greatest gift. He knows best how to demonstrate all of His attributes to us even if we don’t fully understand. Moses learned a lot about God as he dealt with an obstinate and sinful Pharaoh.

It is often in our struggles and seasons of adversity that we see the deeper beauty and value of God. Sometimes, that adversity can only come to us through the pressures and impacts of sinful and hateful people who share this world with us. They are instruments in the hands of our Good God who are being used to shape and mold us for His glory. I think that our responses under pressure are meant to reveal faith, trust, and our understanding that there is more to this life than this life. We are focused on a city not made with human hands and is not of this world. Let’s do our best to reflect the value of our God in the midst of the pain and suffering of this world so others will see.