

A Doctrine of Unceasing Anguish

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Rom 9:2

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ὅτι λύπη μοι ἐστὶ μεγάλη,
καὶ ἀδιάλειπτος ὀδύνη τῆ καρδία μου.

(ESV)

that I have great sorrow
and unceasing anguish in my heart.

Some English might help with vocabulary here. Lypemania is a form of depression, a pathological melancholy. Megalo- is a combining form that means great or large in English: megalomania, megalopolis. An odynometer measures pain. And cardiac of course relates to *kardia*, “heart.”

Paul begins Romans 9 – 11, where he wrestles with how some of Israel are lost, with this confession of how it emotionally affects him. To him the subject is intensely personal. Why are the enemies of God “in” while God’s own covenanted people are “out”?

Among other things, here the Holy Spirit reveals the inner struggle of a pastor’s heart. Paul is sick about it and would perish instead of them if he could. In his affected state he doesn’t even definitively finish his sentences or complete his thoughts. For three chapters he essays one explanation after another to make sense of how this disaster could have happened.

He redefines Israel: spiritual versus ethnic. In prophecy he finds God’s prerogative in election. He exposes how they were tripped up by misunderstanding their own law. He scales down expectations to a mere remnant of Israel, and then paradoxically predicts a future day when they will all come in. He presents the metaphor of Israel as a tree with some branches

broken off and others grafted in. He calls them enemies of the gospel—yet he insists they are beloved and can even be called elect in a sense (11:28). He finally finds a way to worship God in the midst of his heartbreak.

This reminds me of the days and weeks following the destruction of the World Trade Center towers by terrorists on September 11, 2001. Christians struggled with that and threw models at it to try to make sense of what was unthinkable. Some wanted revenge, “Nuke them all!” Some were in denial, “No one cares about slaves who died, so what?” Some were hysterical, “We have already lost!” Some even said they could perceive Satan’s face in the smoke. Paul also sobs model after model to compass the unthinkable.

There is an ongoing discussion in the EPC over “double predestination.” The term is a misnomer, of course. There is nothing double about it. Think of it this way: what does God have to do to elect you? He providentially makes sure you were raised in a Christian home. He arranges that you hear the gospel. He sends his Spirit into your heart so you will believe when you hear. He brings you into a community of faith. He makes sure there are publishers to give you the Bible and other materials (like posted devotionals!). Of course (leaving the best for last), he sends his own Son to the cross for you. He unites you with Jesus’ death and resurrection, empowering you to live your whole life in accordance with your calling. That and more is what he does for the elect.

Now, consider what he does for those he does not elect. Why, nothing at all. He simply stands aside and lets the natural course of events happen without intervention. Although he may facilitate it (9:18), this is hardly

necessary. So election and reprobation are not parallel. There is no symmetry. Perhaps we shouldn't call predestination, "double." We are "penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom. If anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place, he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and he will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit" (*Institutes* III 21.1).

The reprobation of his countrymen caused Paul great psychic misery. Jesus also wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41 – 44). But how are you affected? I think the doctrine should rip our hearts out like watching the towers fall. If affirming the lamentable L of TULIP troubles you, if it causes you "great sorrow and unceasing anguish," perhaps that means you are ready to teach and preach it. "This important and mysterious doctrine of predestination must be treated with special discretion and care" (*WCF* III:8).

Or—do you have a cavalier attitude about it? If for you it is simply like balancing a mathematical equation, a logical byproduct of a passionless system, merely a theological box to be checked, then you aren't feeling it like Paul. Who understands the doctrine best? The one who acutely feels great tension with the lorn L of TULIP? Or the one who is comfortable with it?

Something to think about.