

"ACCURSED FROM CHRIST"

A Critical Monograph on Romans 9:3
Abridged by the Author

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It is revealed in Luke 19:10 that "the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost," and in II Peter 3:9 that the Lord is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." Since it is supported by Scripture it is thus without dispute that Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of man, was and is deeply concerned for the salvation of man. Because this is true of Him who was God manifest in flesh (I Tim. 3:16), who is the Head of the Body, His Church (Eph. 1:22-23), and the sole possessor of the redeemed (I Cor. 6:19-20), it should be equally true of every child of God and especially true of every one who has been called to preach and teach the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every servant of Christ should manifest compassion and genuine love for the lost resulting in a constraining zeal for their salvation. This passion, however, be it ever so noble, must never increase to such an extent that it eclipses one's love for Jesus Christ. First and foremost in the believer's love should be a consistent and effective demonstration of true love for the Master, which should never stand in jeopardy of being relegated to a lesser position by a greater love for lost souls. The Redeemer must be loved preeminently, above and beyond every other person and objective in this life and that which is to come. This fact is interwoven into the heart and thrust of the first and great commandment enunciated by the Lord Jesus Christ, "...Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matt. 22:37).

In the light of this truth the declaration of Paul in Romans 9:3, "For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh," has been highly controversial, lending itself to various interpretations. Such is true because the obvious implication of Paul's statement, as translated in most English Versions, and as explained by many eminent scholars, would lead one to the logical conclusion that Paul's love for Israel exceeded his love for Jesus Christ.

Upon serious reflection of the eternal consequences interlaced in this conclusion, and knowing that Paul's epistles are characterized by sound logic and moral thinking, and that Jesus Christ was the center and circumference of his life (Phil. 1:21), the vexing question gripped my mind, did Paul really make such a wish as a Christian? The answer to this perplexing question challenged me to engage in a critical study of this text to try to determine its true meaning. The following is an abbreviated presentation of the result of my study.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A brief historical sketch of the relationship between Paul and Israel at the time of the writing of the Epistle to the Romans will lay the foundation for the interpretation of the prob-

lem text. Prior to his informative discussion on the present and future position of Israel in the plan of God in chapters nine through eleven, the Apostle presented a masterful treatise on the basic doctrines of the Christian faith in the first eight chapters of Romans. Commencing with a brilliant treatment of universal sin and condemnation (1:18-3:20), he advanced skillfully through the doctrines of justification (3:21-5:21), sanctification (6:1-7:25), and eternal security (8:1-39), concluding joyfully and confidently "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:38, 39).

It was at this moment, during the height of intense elation, while enthralled by the fact of the believer's security in Christ, that the Holy Spirit brought the lost condition of Israel to the forefront of Paul's consciousness. With this truth impressed vividly and forcefully upon his mind, Paul's experience of exultation was penetrated sharply by the existing pangs of deep concern and sorrow for his kinsmen. Were it not for this divinely-timed interruption,

Paul might have appropriately closed this doctrinal part of his epistle. But, meanwhile, the song of triumph with which he terminated that discussion, has awakened powerfully his feelings for his own nation, for whom all glory in Jesus Christ had more immediately been promised and designed.¹

One should observe further that the emotional vicissitude of Paul was undoubtedly precipitated by his anticipation of the hostile reaction of the Jews to the disclosure of the theological discourse in 2:17-5:21. The acute relationship already existing between Paul and Israel would be greatly intensified by virtue of his uncompromising declaration of the guilt and condemnation of the Jew and Gentile before God; the impotency of the religious advantages of the Jews to save; and the fact that justification is bestowed divinely as a free gift, uniquely by the grace of God, excluding all human effort, solely by personal faith in the propitiation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such impartial doctrines were certain to enlarge the breach between Paul and Israel, and increase the anathemas hurled against him since his conversion to Christ. He would probably be accused of favoring the Gentiles, being indifferent to the Jews, and abandoning the divine promises made to Israel in the Old Testament.

It was thus under the stress of this tense situation that Paul was led by the Holy Spirit to pen chapters nine through eleven. Since the subject matter about to be discussed was above all others the most painful and offensive to his Jewish brethren, he approaches it with the greatest caution. The Apostle begins with a very solemn asseveration, appealing to his position in Christ, to verify his sincerity in what is about to be said. It is within this emotional framework that Paul's controversial statement is found, "For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

The writer agrees with the observation that "few passages in the New Testament have puzzled critics and commentators more than this."² It has proved to be a snag in the thinking of many able expositors. Varied interpretations, therefore, have resulted in an attempt to unravel its correct meaning and intent. The different viewpoints, in the main, have evolved from the manner in which scholars have handled the imperfect indicative verb εὐχομῆν, meaning "wish," and the connotation ascribed to anathema, translated "accursed." The fol-

lowing section presents the diverse interpretations with a brief refutation of those judged inadequate.

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Accursed from Christ at Time of Writing These Words

Proponents of this viewpoint believe that Paul actually wished to be eternally separated (anathema) from Christ if it would procure the salvation of his kinsmen. They maintain that he made this wish, while under the pressure of deep distress of soul, to prove his great love for Israel. Many endorsers of this interpretation are ambiguous in their presentation, but John Calvin, the renowned reformer, who subscribes to it, writes clearly:

He (that is, Paul) could not have expressed a greater ardour of love than by what he testifies here; for that is surely perfect love which refuses not to die for the salvation of a friend. But there is another word added, anathema, which proves that he speaks not only of temporal but of eternal death; and he explains its meaning when he says, from Christ, for it signifies a separation. And what is to be separated from Christ, but to be excluded from the hope of salvation? It was then a proof of the most ardent love, that Paul hesitated not to wish for himself that condemnation which he saw impending over the Jews, in order that he might deliver them.³

Some of the others who adhere to this view are Olshausen,⁴ Dodd,⁵ Linn,⁶ Brown,⁷ and Livermore.⁸

There are several valid objections to this interpretation. First, it ignores the basic meaning of the imperfect indicative verb, which is not, "I wish" or "I could wish," but simply, "I was wishing." Second, to affirm, as does Calvin, that it is no objection to this interpretation that Paul "knew that his salvation was based on the election of God, which could by no means fail; for as those ardent feelings hurry us on impetuously, so they see and regard nothing but the object in view,"⁹ does not mitigate the apparent theological incongruity imposed by it upon the thinking of Paul. It seems unlikely that Paul moved by a momentary emotional impulse would have just declared so confidently the fact of his security in Jesus Christ (3:38,39). Third, adialeiptos, an adjective used in 9:2 to describe the intensity of Paul's grief, which means "unceasing or constant," argues against this viewpoint which says that Paul made his rash wish under the strain of an immediate emotional disturbance. For the verse translated literally, "That great sorrow and unceasing grief is in my heart," suggests that deep anguish of soul was the constant experience of Paul for Israel.

Violent Death in Behalf of Brethren

Softening the meaning of anathema, and translating the imperfect indicative verb "wish" as a present tense, the advocates of this viewpoint contend that Paul wished only to die a violent death if it could secure the salvation of Israel. After a lengthy discourse on the meaning of anathema based on the cognate word in the Old Testament in which he concludes that it does not mean eternal death, Albert Barnes, a defender of this interpretation, comments that

the Apostle evidently means to say that he would be willing to suffer the bitterest evils, to forego all pleasure, to endure any privation and toil, nay, to offer his life, so that he might be wholly devoted to sufferings, as an offering, if he might be the means of benefiting and saving the nation. This does not mean that Paul would be willing to be damned forever.¹⁰

This explanation is also held by Jerome,¹¹ Gill,¹² Clarke,¹³ and Scott,¹⁴ to name a few.

Apart from the failure of this viewpoint to render correctly the tense of the imperfect indicative verb, it is untenable by virtue of the connotation that it gives to anathema. This word derives its basic meaning from the Hebrew term kerem. A careful study of this word in the Old Testament, translated "devoted, cursed, accursed, destroyed, and consecrated," and rendered by the term anathema in the Septuagint, reveals that it is used to designate an object or person dedicated either to God or to destruction without the possibility of ever again being redeemed (cf. Lev. 27:28, 29; Deut. 7:26; Josh. 6:17-18; I Sam. 15:21; Mic. 4:13). Leading Hebrew lexicographers support this meaning as illustrated by William Gesenius who says that it speaks of consecration unto God "so that the person or thing thus devoted can never be redeemed, . . . to devote to destruction, to utterly destroy, to exterminate cities and their inhabitants."¹⁵

In the New Testament, beside our text, anathema is found in Acts 23:14, I Cor. 12:3; 16:22, and Gal. 1:8, 9. Little exegetical effort is required to demonstrate that it means eternal damnation in these cases. This was the obvious sense given to the word by the early Christian writers, and from them it passes into the use of the Church. "'Let him be anathema,' being the constant formula of pronouncing anyone, in the judgment of the church, exposed to divine malediction."¹⁶

To erase all doubt concerning the meaning of anathema in the problem text, Paul says, anathema apo tou Christou, translated, "anathema from the Christ." That this speaks of eternal separation from the Lord Jesus Christ should be clear to all, for as Calvin has remarked, "And what is to be separated from Christ, but to be excluded from the hope of salvation?"¹⁷

Excommunication from Church

Insisting that the doom of Israel was not to eternal damnation, but merely excommunication from the Church, the adherents of this interpretation affirm that Paul wished nothing more than to be excommunicated from the Church in the place of Israel. It is thus explained by Williams:

In order to know to what doom Paul would yield himself in the place of the Jews, we must first inquire to what doom they were themselves exposed; for it is this doom only that he would assume in their stead. It has been too rashly taken for granted that their condemnation was to eternal damnation; and that it was, therefore, eternal damnation to which Paul would devote himself in their stead. But this was not Paul's concept with regard to the unbelieving Jews. Paul never taught or conceived that the Jews, whether en masse or individually, were

doomed to be damned, on the ground of unfaith in the Messianic promises, or that even in their apostasy they were beyond the immediate reach and the ultimate saving power of the gospel. They were anathema from the Christ; they were en masse counted outside of the community, and individually out of communion with the Christian Church. When Paul thinks of anathema in connection with the Jews, the utmost that he has in his thought is, that the once elect people are now separated en masse from the Messiah, that is, from the Messianic Church of the fathers. He declares that to save them to the Church and to Christ, if so it could be, to devote himself to be excommunicated in their stead.¹⁸

Several other proponents of this view are Sumner,¹⁹ Valpy,²⁰ Henry,²¹ and Poole.²²

The fallacy of this position is quite apparent, and needs no lengthy refutation. In addition to the erroneous interpretation of the imperfect indicative verb, without any valid support from Holy Scripture, it makes anathema mean "excommunication," and "from the Christ" mean "from the Church." One need not be an expert in theology, or skilled in the art of exegesis, to disprove these renditions. For a mere perusal of Holy Writ will reveal that anathema never means "excommunication," and "from the Christ" cannot possibly mean "from the Church," since Christ is not the Church but the Head of the Church, which is His Body composed of born-again believers (I Cor. 12:12, 12; Eph. 1:21-23, 2:19-22). This viewpoint, which declares that Paul "never taught or conceived that the Jews, whether en masse or individually, were doomed to be damned, on the ground of unfaith in the Messianic promises,"²³ is, to say the least, laded with doctrinal aberrations.

A Conditional Statement

This is by far the most popular and common explanation, and is embraced by a large host of capable scholars. Believing that it was the intent of Paul to express his ardent love for Israel during the peak of an emotional crisis, and accepting the plain meaning of "anathema from Christ," and cognizant of the serious implications involved in the character of Paul's wish, the advocates of this interpretation say that the wish was hypothetical because he knew that it was wrong and could never be realized. Well known for his ability to expound the Word of God, a holder of this viewpoint, Charles Hodge writes that Paul does

not say that he did deliberately and actually entertain such a wish. The expression is evidently hypothetical and conditional, "I could wish were the thing allowable, possible or proper." So far from saying he actually desired to be thus separated from Christ, he impliedly says the very reverse. "I could wish it, were it not wrong; or, did it not involve my being unholy as well as miserable, but as such is the case, the desire cannot be entertained." This is the proper force of the imperfect indicative when thus used; it implies the presence of a condition which is known to be impossible.²⁴

Other commentators who subscribe to this view are Alford,²⁵ Shedd,²⁶ Plumer,²⁷ Lenski,²⁸ Robinson,²⁹ Meyer,³⁰ Westcott,³¹ Godet,³² Stuart,³³ and many more.

The main objection to this interpretation is its arbitrary treatment of the imperfect indicative verb. Paul did not say, "I could wish if it were possible," but plainly, "I was wishing." Since there are standard constructions in the Greek to express a conditional wish (discussed in the writer's defense of his position), apart from the assumed purpose for Paul's wish (i.e. to prove his deep love for Israel), there is no valid argument for the imposition of the hypothetical character upon Euchomēn.

It should be observed further that it is highly improbable that such an unreal postulation as required by this view would have served its implied purpose. To say, as does Hodge,³⁴ that Paul did not really entertain such a wish because it could not be realized, and yet insist that he used this hypothetical means to impress upon the minds of his kinsmen his ardent love for them is to engage in circular reasoning that proves nothing in the end. Upon close examination it would seem that the assumed intent of this wish would be stripped of its relevance.

The illogic of such a conditional wish is seen in the following paraphrase. According to this viewpoint Paul is saying, "I desire to impress upon the minds of my Jewish brethren my great concern for their lost condition, and also my deep love for them. The greatest sacrifice, therefore, which I could make to prove my great love would be to wish myself accursed (eternally separated) from Christ if this would secure their salvation. Realizing, however, that such a wish could never be attained, I refrain from actually making it. Essentially, then, I am saying that I could wish to be separated eternally from Christ in behalf of my kinsmen to gain their salvation, but since this wish could never be fulfilled, I am not actually making such a wish."

We find it difficult to understand how Paul could have proved his point with the above circular reasoning. It appears that if it were Paul's purpose to prove his love for Israel that he would have wished for something which had at least a remote chance of being realized. Such a wish, as supposed by this interpretation, is no wish at all, and thus is devoid of meaning.

A Parenthetical Statement

The endorsers of this explanation rest their case heavily upon the primary sense of the imperfect indicative verb. It is their claim that Paul's wish is to be interpreted parenthetically; that it describes his own state prior to conversion, while separated (anathema) willfully from Christ; that it reflects the present condition of his countrymen, and explains the reason for his great concern and sorrow for them. After questioning the likelihood of Paul's making a wish that had no possible chance of being fulfilled as expounded by the Conditional view, Griffith Thomas submits the Parenthetical view as the best interpretation:

When we carefully look at the Greek text we feel inclined to doubt this familiar interpretation, for there is no "could" in the Greek, which is quite literally, "I used to wish," or "I was wishing." Let us read the words in this light. "I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart (for I myself used to pray to be accursed from the Messiah) for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." When read thus, the words form a parenthesis, and give special point to his sorrow.³⁵

A few of the other adherents of this position are Kendrick,³⁶ Haldane,³⁷ Darby,³⁸ Mahan,³⁹ Ironside,⁴⁰ and Lange.⁴¹

WRITER'S INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT

It is believed that a satisfactory treatment of this controversial text requires a careful examination of the areas of grammar, context, and logic. Considered together it is my opinion that the conclusions deduced from these lines of investigation present a strong case for the acceptance of the Parentetical view, because it alone is in keeping with the basic function of the imperfect indicative tense of ēuchomēn, and thus clears the passage of any implied doctrinal and moral offense.

Argument from Grammar

Meaning of the imperfect tense. --Mention should be made that, apart from a minor variation found in manuscripts D (sixth century) and G (ninth century), there are no variant readings within the text which would alter or influence its interpretation. It reads, ēuchomēn gar anathema einai autos egō apo tou Christou, translated literally, "For I myself was wishing to be anathema from the Christ." Attention should also be called to the fact that the original manuscripts did not contain any punctuation marks; therefore, some freedom is permitted to the scholar to make changes in punctuation which are reasonable and restrained. The writer believes that Rom. 9:1-3, which lends itself to the Parentetical view, is a case that warrants some changes.

In any endeavor to exegete Scripture it is standard procedure to accept the primary sense of a tense unless there are valid hermeneutical grounds for its rejection. Such a basis, in my judgment, does not exist for the dismissal of the regular usage of the imperfect tense used by Paul. A quick check of the recognized texts on Greek grammar will reveal that the "imperfect is used of action in progress in past time,"⁴² and this is manifestly the most characteristic use of the tense."⁴³ This action may be simultaneous, prolonged, descriptive, repeated, customary, interrupted, attempted, or begun, but always occurring in the past. The exact type of action happening in past time will be determined by the immediate context or related Scripture. In our text it is believed that Paul was using the imperfect tense to describe his own experience prior to conversion to Christ.

Means of expressing a conditional wish. --There are several ways by which Paul could have expressed a hypothetical wish if he so desired. In addition to the subjunctive mood, which is the mood of mild contingency assuming unreality, he could have used the optative mood. This is believed to be a step farther removed from reality than the subjunctive, and is the mood of strong condition that contains no definite hope of realization.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the use of ei with the indicative can be used to denote "that there is no hope of fulfillment, and an, a particle, can stand either "with the optative or indicative, and imparts to the verb a contingent meaning."⁴⁵

It is to be noted that the main words used to express a wish are euchomai and boulomai. Beside Romans 9:3, euchomai is found in Acts 27:29 in the imperfect indicative form, and in Acts 26:29 in the optative mood with the particle an. In the first case the imperfect indicative

verb is used to describe continuous action in the past, but the presence of an implied condition in the latter instance has called for the optative euxaimēn with the particle an. It is the wish of Paul before King Agrippa in which he said, "I would to God (that is, I would pray to God) that not only thou but all who hear me this day, were both almost and altogether such as I am, except these bonds."

The verb boulomai is used in Acts 25:22; 28:18, II Cor. 1:15, and Phile. 13 in the imperfect indicative form stressing action in the past, and is found once in the optative mood with ei in Acts 25:20. Since no conditions are involved in the wishes in the former cases, the imperfect indicative form is used; however, the presence of a strong condition in the latter case required the optative mood with ei. It is therefore maintained that a careful check of these texts will support the contention that ēuchomēn in Rom. 9:3 should be interpreted as denoting action in past time minus the hypothetical character.

The correct position of the intensive pronoun. --To some this might be considered a minor point, but, in my judgment, the proper position of the intensive pronoun autos in the translation of this verse does contribute to the defense of the Parenthetical view. The text reads thus: ēuchomēn gar anathema einai autos egō apo tou Christou. It is to be observed that autos appears in the nominative case, and is used with egō to emphasize the subject. This means then that it must be placed in the subject, and should be translated, "I myself was wishing to be accursed from Christ," and not as found in the King James Version, "I could wish myself to be accursed from Christ." Such a rendition of autos makes it appear as an object of the verb. A correct placing of this pronoun eliminates any implication that Paul was making the wish at the time of the writing of this text.

The meaning of adialeptos. --Since this adjective means "unceasing or constant" it implies that sorrow and grief for Israel had been in Paul's heart before penning this passage. This fact would argue against all views which insist that he made a sudden hypothetical wish under the immediate strain of a pronounced emotional crisis, and would tend to support the Parenthetical view which affirms that grief and sorrow for his kinsmen were always with Paul.

Argument from Context

In a very true sense the closing thoughts of Paul in chapter eight influenced his introduction in chapter nine, for the conclusion in chapter eight declares the wonderful truth that there is no separation from Christ for the believer. Evidently this fact shaped the leading thought in the opening of chapter nine because Paul was confronted immediately by the heartbreaking realization that his people were not able to share in his exultation and confidence since they were separated from Christ.

This separation was of their own choosing evolving from their rejection of Christ, which appears to be expressed in the wish of Paul, and this fact explains the imperfect indicative tense used by the Apostle. He reflects the true spiritual condition of his kinsmen at the time of writing by referring to his own former state of unbelief. What he himself wished in the past, while hurling blasphemies upon Christ and His followers as a bigoted Pharisee and devotee of the Mosaic Law, is in reality the present status of Israel. The sudden confrontation by this fact undoubtedly accentuated the already existing sorrow in Paul's heart for his Jewish brethren.

Since Paul was speaking of his own condition prior to conversion he rightfully used the imperfect tense, for it declared his experience of many years as going on in the past without stipulating the terminus. The ad quem of his state of anathema from Christ was unimportant, because his primary purpose in recalling it was merely to explain the presence of constant sorrow in his heart for Israel, which was brought forcefully to the forefront of his consciousness by the glorious truth that there is no separation from Christ for the redeemed. The terminus of his lost condition is revealed clearly in other passages of Scripture.

Argument from Logic

This line of evidence is presented to show the serious implications of the views which declare that Paul actually wished to be anathema from Christ, or that he expressed a hypothetical wish to be separated from Christ. It is maintained that these logical deductions contribute weight in support of the Parenthetical view.

1. Regardless of how men may argue that such a wish doesn't mean that Paul loved his kindred more than Christ, the obvious conclusion is that if he did entertain this wish then his love for Israel exceeded his love for Jesus Christ. To dismiss this objection by saying that he did not really make the wish since he spoke hypothetically does not remove the offense, for such implies that Paul would have wished to be separated from Christ were it possible. By all rules of sound logic this implies a greater love for his kinsmen than for Christ. It is indeed true that to

desire the curse of God would be to desire not only suffering, but moral alienation from Him, the withdrawal of the soul's capacity to love Him. Thus the wish would be in effect an act of greater love for our neighbor than for God.⁴⁶

2. Such a wish, whether expressed actually or hypothetically, must mean that Paul desired to exchange heaven for hell. Reflection upon the grave consequences interwoven into this fact causes one to shudder. In addition to eternal separation from the Lord Jesus Christ, whom Paul loved preeminently (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21), it would mean separation from the other members of the Godhead, from all the redeemed; and the sufferings of everlasting torment, along with the destruction of his ability to love; and to experience moral and spiritual deterioration forever and ever. Surely sound logic constrains one to say that Paul could under no circumstances even suggest such a wish as a believer.

3. To make such a wish as a believer would be deliberate sin. Cowles has explained thus:

Bearing in mind that the context requires that "anathema from Christ," should be essentially separation from Christ; and also that the case of the unbelieving Jews must interpret and determine Paul's meaning in these words, we are compelled to say that this wish and prayer are a great sin. It certainly was sin as it lay in the hearts of the unbelieving Jews, cursing the name of Christ. It was a sin of the same sort as it lay in Paul's ungodly life, when he was compelling Christians to blaspheme; and this, it would seem, must be the sense of his words here. Still more revolting and insupportable will this appear, if we con-

sider that it is this very sin of his brethren which agonizes his heart at this moment so terribly. Is it possible, now, that in the same breath he can say, "I could wish for myself the same sin and the same doom, in behalf of my brethren."⁴⁷

4. The final consideration is doctrinal. Paul's writings contain many references to the doctrine of eternal security within the framework of divine election and predestination. To maintain, therefore, that Paul would deliberately propose even a hypothetical wish which opposed his revealed theology appears to be an attack against his theological consistency. That Paul loved deeply the Jewish people cannot be denied, but he loved the Lord Jesus Christ more. His deep concern for Israel can amount to no more than expressed in the words, "Brethren my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1).

ENGLISH PARAPHRASE

"I am speaking the truth in Christ, I do not lie, my conscience continues to bear me witness in the Holy Spirit, that great grief and constant sorrow is in my heart (for I was once wishing myself to be accursed from Christ) for my brethren my kinsmen according to the flesh."

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