

August 2, 2026

Romans 9:1-5 “It’s All About Grace”

I have a confession to make. I really didn’t know the guy who preached here last week. I know that’s risky. Kind of like when I show a movie I’ve never seen before in *Faith and Films*. See, my original plan was to have Brian Peterson fill in while Mary and I were away. Brian’s a good friend of Mary’s, a terrific preacher, and someone she’s been encouraging me to invite here for quite a while. I bumped into him at Bidwell Perk last month at our weekly Wednesday clergy gathering and I asked him if he’d be willing to preach on the last Sunday in July. He said, “I’d love to... but I’m going to be out of town that weekend.” Then he said, “But I know someone who might preach for you,” and pointed across the table to this Duke Divinity School grad named Max. I vaguely recognized him, and after we talked for a few minutes, we both realized that we had met at our Maundy Thursday service back in April when he came with Nick and Robin from First Baptist. Brian spoke very highly of him, he grew up with Robin, and he graduated from a world-class seminary. What more could I ask for? So I asked if he’d be interested. He checked his calendar and said, “Sure. I can make that work.”

As we corresponded over the next few weeks, I became even more convinced this was going to work. We had some great conversations about how I was working through Romans. I found out he’d been watching our services on FaceBook Live. I thought, “this guy has some of the most famous scholars and preachers from Duke Divinity School on speed dial and has been following us online! Yeah, this will be good!”

Two weeks ago, I mentioned to Pastor Ben Colohan from Faith Lutheran that Max was filling in for me while I was out of town. Ben paused for and said, “Really? Yeah, Max is an interesting guy.” *Interesting?* “Interesting” can mean a lot of things. I asked, “How so?” Ben smiled and said, “Oh, he’ll be fine.” Now, I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed, but the word *fine* can be one of the most terrifying words in the English language, especially if you’ve lived anywhere East of the Mississippi.

Well, as it turned out, he wasn't just fine—he was terrific. Georgia texted me after worship Sunday and said he knocked it out of the park. When I got home, I watched the service online, and she was absolutely right. He was thoughtful, engaging, and exactly the kind of preacher I had hoped he'd be. Everything unfolded exactly as I expected.

But life doesn't always work that way does it? Sometimes our expectations are met. Sometimes they're exceeded. And sometimes they're completely shattered. Paul knew that feeling. And this morning we're going to get a glimpse of his disappointment.

With that in mind, and with our text for this morning in front of us, let's talk about times when things don't unfold in the way we expect. In Paul's case, we're talking about his hopes and expectations when it came to the church in Rome receiving the good news of Jesus. Paul doesn't start this section with any kind of doctrine like you'd expect him to. He begins by sharing his heartbreak over people's rejection of Jesus. He's not angry. He's not condemning Israel. He's grieving. And he's grieving because the very people who received every one of God's gifts – the covenants, the patriarchs, the law, and even the Messiah himself have largely rejected Jesus. But even though he's never met these folks in person, he approaches the matter with love in his heart.

If you just look at this passage from a bird's eye view, you'd think the question on the table is, "Are the Jews saved?" But that's not the question. The question is more like, "Has God's promise failed?" If God's chosen people don't recognize the Messiah, can God's faithfulness still be trusted? Remember - last week's chapter ended with, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." This week's chapter begins with, "Why, then, does everything seem so broken down?"

Now, if we're honest, every one of us has asked that question in one way or another. Maybe not about Israel. Maybe not about Romans 9. But we've asked it. We ask it when someone we love walks away from the

faith. We ask it when a marriage falls apart. We ask it when a child chooses a path that leads to potential destruction. We ask it when a church struggles, or when a prayer we've prayed for years still seems to go unanswered. We look at what's unfolding in front of us and quietly wonder, "God, what happened? I didn't think this was the way the story was supposed to go."

That's where Paul is. I want you to notice something important: Before he says one word about election, before he wrestles with Israel, before he starts making theological arguments, he *grieves*. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." Those aren't the words of someone trying to win an argument. Those are the words of someone whose heart is breaking. I think that's important because Christians haven't always been very good at the grief that comes along with dealing with disappointment, especially when that disappointment involves our expectations of people. Because quite often, we're far more interested in deciding who's "in" and who's "out" than we are in grieving over people we love. We're quicker to debate than to weep.

Paul refuses to do that. His first response isn't judgment. His first response is love. Now, listen again to the way Paul describes Israel. He gives a long list of the gifts they've been given. They were adopted as God's people. They experienced God's glory. They received the covenants. They were given the Law. They were entrusted with worship. They inherited the promises. They are descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And from them, according to the flesh, came the Messiah himself.

See what Paul is doing? He's reminding his readers that God has been faithful every step of the way. Every one of those gifts is evidence that God has not abandoned God's people. Which brings us back to the real question: "If God has been faithful through all of that... then why does everything seem so broken down?" Has God's promise failed? Paul's answer over the next three chapters is, "No." Not because everything is

going according to Paul's expectations, but because God's faithfulness has never been limited by Paul's expectations.

And maybe that's where this text starts to speak to us. Because we all have these categories that we use to label people. Let's call them what they are – they're boxes that we conveniently put people in when we don't know what to do with them. We have people we've quietly decided are just too far gone. People who've been hurt and would never step foot in a church again. People who never seem to be able to forgive. People who we think will never change. People who don't belong. And *every* generation draws those lines. Who is in. Who is out. The surprise of the gospel is that God keeps drawing the circle larger than we do. Now, that doesn't mean everyone responds to God's grace. Paul knows that. But it does mean that we should be very careful whenever we think we've figured out the limits of God's grace and mercy.

The story of Scripture is full of people who surprised everyone. Abraham and Sarah were too old. Moses was “slow of speech.” David was just a shepherd boy. Ruth was a foreigner. Jonah discovered God loved Nineveh *way* more than *he* wanted God to. The prophet Jeremiah didn't think he could deliver God's message to Israel because he was just a kid. Peter couldn't imagine Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit. Paul couldn't imagine becoming an apostle. And to be honest, the other apostles couldn't imagine him being an apostle either! Again and again, God refuses to fit inside the boxes that human beings create. Maybe that's one of the great lessons of Romans 9. The question isn't whether God's faithfulness is big enough. The question is whether our imagination is.

So here's what I hope you'll take home with you this morning. When life doesn't unfold the way you expected... ..when someone you love makes choices you never imagined...when the Church disappoints you... ..when the world seems more divided than ever... ..when you find yourself asking, "God, what happened? This isn't where I thought the story was supposed to go..." Don't be too quick to conclude that God's

promises have failed. That's exactly where Paul found himself. Everything he thought should happen seemed to be falling apart. Yet he never stopped believing that God was faithful. And maybe that's the invitation for us. We don't have to have every theological question answered before we trust God's character. We don't have to know where every story ends before we believe that God is still at work. We don't have to decide who is beyond God's reach.

Our job isn't to draw the boundaries of God's grace. Our job is to bear witness to the God who, in Christ, keeps surprising us with mercy and grace. Because the good news has never been that we have finally figured God out. The good news is that God's faithfulness has always been greater than our expectations. So this week, instead of asking, "Who has God given up on?" maybe ask a different question: "Where might God still be at work that I haven't yet imagined?" If nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, then maybe the safest place to stand isn't at the edge of God's grace, trying to define its limits, but in the middle of it, giving thanks that it reached us—and trusting that God is still reaching farther than we can see.