

Great Sorrow of heart and Unceasing anguish for the unsaved Romans 9:1-5

Two world-renowned men died last month. The first was Dr Billy Graham. As a direct result of his death and funeral it is reported that 10 and a half thousand people have responded by either making a first time declaration of faith in Christ or have made a recommitment after backsliding from faith in following Christ. What a testimony his funeral was, and what a legacy, even in death he has left behind. Christ's message through him has continued to bring people to faith. People of the world, who Billy Graham loved and deeply desired, even unceasingly anguished over in his heart, that they might hear Christ's message and receive him into their hearts, believe and be born again as a follower of Christ.

And then the second person, what might be seen as Billy Graham's epitome, an anathema even, the scientist Stephen Hawking. A brilliant academic who directed by his Father, read the Bible as a young person, who had the way of Christ shared with him by Christian believers as an adult, a man who because of his Cambridge Academic tradition his funeral was held in St Mary's Church, but none the less, a man who had rejected God, salvation found only in Jesus Christ and the eternal life that being born again by the Holy Spirit brings. From what is known, Stephen Hawking remained an atheist up until his dying breath. That is his testimony. The legacy he leaves though as one of the greatest physicists in history, according to one professor, is that scientists "will still be talking about Hawking radiation," his theory about black holes, a thousand years from now. In life he was known as a real comedian, a funny guy who according to his autobiography from the beginning of his academic career, "wanted to fathom the depths of the universe," seeking to understand "where we came from and why we are here." His story is both as fascinating as it is tragic, with enormous implications for our faith and culture today. Several times in his autobiography, he says that he had a "satisfying life" pointing to his successful career, the fact that he was married twice and had three "beautiful and accomplished children," along with all his global travels and meetings with world leaders. At the end his book he said, "I'm happy if I have added something to our understanding of the universe."

Now, some atheists reject God's existence because they cannot

reconcile an all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful God with evil and suffering in the universe. Tragedies such as child death and abuse, disease and terminal illness', wars, even New Zealand's Road Toll this year. These issues lead sceptics to proclaim that there is no God. Hawking's atheism however was of another kind. He said this, "We are each free to believe what we want and it is my view that the simplest explanation is that there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate."

Stephen Hawking chose atheism when:

He rejected the concept of a personal God with whom we can have a personal relationship: "When you look at the vast size of the universe and how insignificant an accidental human life is in it, that seems most impossible." But why? Why is the apparent insignificance of a human life relevant to the existence of a Creator and the possibility of relationship with him?

He became convinced that "spontaneous creation" explains the existence of the universe, with no need to appeal to a Creator. But even then one Oxford mathematician, John Lennox, has pointed out that his theory requires the prior existence of gravity so must then explain how gravity came to be. He must also explain how a law can create physical reality (for instance, Newton's laws of motion do not cause a moving car to exist). And, even given Hawking's parameters, could God not have designed a self-creating universe?

Hawking declared: "I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken-down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."

You and I both know that computers and people are far more different than alike. Philosophers have a term for this. It is a "category mistake," like asking what is the colour of number seven or the weight of a circle. The fact that computers have no afterlife bears no relevance to an afterlife for humans. And it is upon this mistaken logic that Hawking tragically has risked his eternity.

Why does Stephen Hawking's atheism matter today?

Imagine what his brilliant mind could have contributed to humankind if it had been empowered by the Spirit of God. Imagine his influence as an intellectual Christian. Another C. S. Lewis, and then some. And imagine his eternal reward if he had turned from the creation to the Creator, trusting his soul to our Saviour.

My Point being: If we as followers of Christ do not grieve the deaths of Stephen Hawking, and other non-Christians, something is very, very wrong. We become unwitting universalists believing everyone is saved, when we ignore the fact that (John 3:18) "whoever does not believe is condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God". Such a person is not in the "book of life" and will spend eternity separated from God in 'the lake of fire' or hell as it is commonly referred to (Rev 20:15) which were my dying mother's last words to me. "If your name's not written in the lambs book of life, you'd better watch out!" If people could go to heaven without Jesus, why did Jesus die for us?

Why did the apostle Paul carry such a heavy burden of sorrow in his heart" for his fellow Jews who like Stephen Hawking had rejected the gospel, that Jesus was the Messiah, the one and only anointed Son of God? Why does he hold on to such great anguish for his fellow Jews? (Romans 9:2)

Paul's sorrow and anguish was born out of his great love for his fellow Jews, by far the majority of whom had rejected the Gospel. For Paul his heartfelt thinking was 'Has the word of God to Israel concerning her salvation come to nothing? Surely I know that the gospel is not incapable of saving my fellow Jews.

The answer was an emphatic NO because through the Holy Spirit his conscience had been enlightened. The Holy Spirit who would never lead him into emotional based reasoning as the Spirit of Truth is the one and only reliable guide he had to follow and submit all his conscious thoughts and feelings too.

Paul's countrymen had rejected Jesus; they had received everything from the Lord their God and now they returned God's favour by rejecting his Son. This is why Paul is deeply distressed in our Romans passage expressing his grief for Israel who had renounced faith in Jesus as their Messiah.

Paul is filled with anguish for the present state of Israel. His fellow Jews had a full and complete place before the living God, but have done everything humanly possible to try and put themselves outside his grace. So for Paul, a Jew, it is a great loss, which is to heavy a burden to bear.

That's why he goes as far to say in v.3 that if it were possible, he would go to the total extreme being willing to trade places with his

fellow unbelieving Jews. Paul is willing to forfeit his salvation for them. "If I could... I would ask this of God. And why this depth of feeling by Paul? Well, they are his "brothers", his "own race"; they are members of God's family, but are in rebellion against Him.

Instead of relishing the privileges of being God's blessed, chosen and adopted children, they have lost them and that causes Paul so much pain with the Covenants broken, the gift of the law and the promised blessings of God no longer working in their favour because from them came the Messiah, "who is God over all, forever praised" as Lord and master, whom they had rejected. With this list of privileges before Paul, what else can he do but be filled with anguish at the thought that so many of his fellow Jews had lost everything.

Paul uses this same term for sorrow and anguish in his second letter to the Corinthians (7:10) Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. When an unbeliever be it Jew or Gentile experiences the sorrow that was overwhelming Paul... it Truly is Godly sorrow and you are saved. (V4) Despite Israel - Jacob's descendants, the Chosen people of God unbelief and disobedience, God's promises to her are still valid. The same is to be said of all unbelieving people today, Jew or Gentile.

Our Saviour's invitation is still open as we have just celebrated in communion this morning with his own words for all, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). But we must turn from ourselves to our Maker: "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all" (v. 63).

Beware the "illusion of knowledge". Ironically, Stephen Hawking was convinced that "the greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge." However, his rejection of God was one such "illusion of knowledge." Now, tragically, he knows better. To conclude: Are you praying for the non-Christians you know to know the Truth before it is too late?

The 17th Century Bible commentator Matthew Henry said this, "To be insensible to the eternal condition of our fellow-human beings, is contrary both to the love required by the law, and the mercy of the gospel." Along with Matthew Henry, the apostle Paul and Billy Graham may we persist in fervent prayer and with 'Great Sorrow of Heart and Unceasing Anguish for the Unsaved.'

