



Have you ever been sitting somewhere, maybe in your office or family room or in a coffee shop—it's a warm sunny day, but all of sudden the weather changes—the sky darkens, trees begin to bend in the wind, the temperature drops and rain starts to fall? The switch from Romans 8 to 9 is a lot like that. Romans 8 is all sunshine, ending in a confident declaration that no one and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. But then we come to Romans 9. This is one of the most challenging chapters to understand in all the Bible. Not only is it a challenge to understand, it also deals with a subject that's hard to swallow. So I run the risk today of boring some of you, confusing others, and making the rest of you mad! There are preachers who even skip Romans 9 to avoid all that and get to more exciting stuff later in the book. But that would be a mistake. Romans 9 deals with a very significant subject for us: God's sovereignty, as well as his faithfulness to his promises, particularly to Israel. Let me explain why this was an issue.

Starting with God's call to Abraham, Israel was God's instrument to proclaim to the world who the true God is and what his plan of redemption has always been. People back then were afraid of God. They sacrificed their children to appease him. To show the world who he truly is, God chose one nation. They'd be his missionaries to proclaim to all the truth about God. Over the span of several thousand years that was the Jews' mission to the world. Finally, God himself came to earth as a Jewish man. His name was Jesus, the Messiah, who came to save his people from sin.

But something quite odd happened with the coming of Jesus. The apostle John put it this way, *"He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him"* (John 1:11). For the most part, the Jewish people rejected their own Messiah. This raised lots of questions:

- How could Israel not recognize their own Messiah?
- Didn't they have all the prophecies about Jesus in their own Scriptures?
- What about all those Old Testament promises to Israel? Are they all just nullified?
- How does the conversion of the Gentiles fit into God's plan?
- Does God still have a plan for Israel, or is he done with them forever?

You can see right off the bat these issues weighed heavy on Paul's heart. Look what he says:

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could

wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen (Romans 9:1-5).

Obviously, this was personal to Paul. He was a zealous Jew, a Pharisee and a persecutor of Christians. But then Jesus appeared to him and convinced him he was the promised Messiah. As a result, Paul wanted more than anything to share this good news with his fellow Jews. He went from synagogue to synagogue preaching Jesus, but most of them didn't buy it. In fact, they often ran him out of town or even stoned him. But when Paul took to the streets with the gospel, he found a far more receptive audience among non-Jewish people called Gentiles.

All of this perplexed Paul. Why were the very people God had chosen rejecting the gospel, while the Gentiles ate it up? They had so many advantages. You can see how this tore him up. He even says he's willing to give up his salvation if it meant they could be saved. Those of us with loved ones who are lost know this pain. We may enjoy their company, but we carry a deep anguish underneath. I must confess this verse leaves me convicted. I don't always love people the way Paul did. My heart doesn't always break for the lost like his did. But that's the heart of God, a broken heart, when people don't respond to his love. That was the heart of Paul, too, because his fellow Jews refused the gospel.

But all of this forced Paul to rethink his theology. So, here in Romans 9 is the start of his explanation of why so many of his countrymen failed to believe the gospel. And in the end he'll reveal how this was all part of God's sovereign plan to create a new Israel of both Jews and Gentiles.

Not All Israel are Israel

Paul addresses this mystery starting in verses 6-13. He wants to show right off the bat God's word has not failed. He says, *"It is not as though God's word has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."* God gave promises and made covenants with the Jewish people. For example, God promised Abraham he'd bless his descendants and make them into a great nation. But Paul makes a rather shocking distinction here. He says, just because you're born an Israelite doesn't mean you're part of true Israel. And there are others who aren't ethnically Jewish who **are** part of true Israel. There's a spiritual Israel. To prove his point, Paul gives two Old Testament examples. The first comes in verses 7-9,

Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

God promised Abraham his descendants—the Israelites—would be blessed. But not all his descendants were in fact blessed. Abraham had two sons. The first, Ishmael, was born when Sarah, who was barren, gave Abraham her handmaid Hagar. That was an acceptable thing to do in that culture. But God's promise was for Sarah to have a son. Later, God kept his promise and Sarah bore a son named Isaac. God told Abraham it wasn't through Ishmael but through Isaac his offspring would be reckoned. So only one of Abraham's physical offspring was considered among God's children. Again, this shows just because you're born an Israelite doesn't mean you're a true Israelite.

Then he gives another example in the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah,

Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (verses 10-13).

Though the twin boys Jacob and Esau were both descendants of Abraham, only one became a spiritual descendant and inherited the promises. Normally the older son would be the heir, but here God said the older (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob). This choice had nothing to do with Jacob being a good boy and Esau being a bad boy. In fact, Jacob grew up to be quite a scoundrel. But this was a choice God made before they were born and either could do anything good or bad. For Paul, this explains why some of Abraham's descendants are true Israel and others are not. It's all traced back to God's purpose in election, which shows this privileged status comes not by works but by him who calls. If God chose people based on if they were good and bad, salvation would be by works, but Paul has been saying since the start of Romans it's not through good works but God's grace.

For good measure, Paul throws in a quote from Malachi, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." That sounds terrible to us! How could the God of love hate anyone? But it's important to understand the word "hate" was used differently than we use it today. It was a Hebrew idiom for preference. Remember when Jesus said, "*If you want to be my disciple, you have to hate your father, mother, wife, children and even your own life*" (Luke 14:26). He wasn't saying we should hate our family, but our love for God should be so intense that, when push comes to shove, we choose or prefer Jesus over anyone else. It's a relative thing. In the same way, God preferred Jacob over Esau. Again, it's not about works because they were both scoundrels. And it's not about race because they were both Jews born of the same parents. No, it's about

grace. It's about God choosing to show his mercy to someone who doesn't deserve it. This is commonly called the doctrine of predestination or election. Jesus taught the same thing. He said, "*All those the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away,*" and, "*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him*" (John 6:37, 44). Now this may bother you. It doesn't seem fair, but let me just point out a few things:

First, none of this negates the importance of human choices. Esau went on to forfeit his birthright because of his own worldliness. He also later lost his father's blessing because of his brother's deceit. So human choices and responsibility are woven through this story and we can't discount that. We all make choices and we're responsible for them.

Second, we're never given a reason God chooses one person over another. Does that mean God is arbitrary in his choices? Is it like, "Eeny, meeny, miney, moe"? No, it just means we're not privy to his reasons. And sometimes we just need to let God be God. God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts.

Third, this teaching about election is consistent with what Paul has been saying all along in Romans. We're saved by grace alone, not by works. If the difference between a believer and an unbeliever ultimately depends on whether we're good or bad or even are open to the gospel then we're the real authors of our salvation and we have something to boast about.

Fourth, in all of this we have to remember God loves all people. We all know John 3:16, "*For God so loved the world...*" And 2 Peter 3:9, "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*" Somehow we have to hold in tension the idea that God doesn't want anyone to be lost with the fact that he chooses some and not others.

Is God Unjust?

Now, with all that in mind, Paul goes on and deals with some objections to this whole idea. Look what he asks:

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden (verses 14-18).

Paul brings up what everyone brings up when they hear about election: It's not fair! How could he choose some and not others? Is God unjust? Paul says, "Not at all!" He points to two examples.

He starts with Moses. He quotes Exodus 33 where Moses begged God to continue to be present with Israel even though they'd rejected him. God said to him, "*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have*

compassion" (Ex 33:19). At first that sounds unfair, but think about it. Mercy is never an obligation. The very nature of mercy is it's undeserved. Paul says, "For you to say it's unfair for God to have mercy on some and not others doesn't make sense. God doesn't owe mercy to anyone, which means he's free to give it to whoever he wants. Why? Because salvation, Paul says, "doesn't depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

What if a really rich person chose 50 inner-city kids and paid for their college tuition? There are thousands of kids he could have chosen who were equally deserving. And this rich man has the ability to help more than just 50 kids. He could help a thousand kids. But can anyone say that since he helped just 50, he's being unfair to everyone else? No, he has no obligation to help any of them. Since what he did was an expression of mercy, no can say he's being unfair. You see, no one has a claim on God's mercy. If we did, it wouldn't be mercy. We know the "wages of sin is death." That's what we deserve, so the shock isn't that God doesn't extend his mercy to everyone, but that he extends it to **anyone**.

Paul also mentions Pharaoh. He was the king of Egypt who refused to let the Hebrew people go free. He had a very hard heart. But why? God said to Pharaoh, "I raised you up for this very purpose—to display my power and make my name known throughout the world." Paul even says God has mercy on whoever he wants, and he hardens whoever he wants. It kind of sounds like maybe Pharaoh was a really nice man, but then God came and made his heart hard, so he had no choice in the matter. But if you go back and read the story of Pharaoh, not only does it say God hardened his heart, but it also says repeatedly Pharaoh hardened his own heart against God. First, Pharaoh brutally enslaved God's people, then he tried to wipe them out through infanticide. So, it's like Pharaoh decided to resist God and then God simply gave him over to what he chose. Again, human responsibility plays a big part in all of this.

Who are We to Talk Back to God?

Paul then moves on to another objection: One of you will say to me: "**Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?**" (v. 19) That seems like a valid question. If God shows mercy to one person but hardens another, how can anyone be blamed for what they do? Pharaoh could just say to God, "Hey, I didn't have a choice in the matter." How can God hold people accountable when he makes all the decisions? Paul responds in two ways, First, he says God made us and so he has the right to do whatever he wants:

But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use? (verses 20-21).

Remember when your parents used to say to you, "Don't talk back." Well, that's kind of the point here: don't talk back to God! What right do you have to question your Creator? Wouldn't it be ludicrous if, instead of making a piece of fine china out of a lump of clay, the potter decided to make a common vase and the vase

said, "You can't do that. I get to decide what I should be"? That is ridiculous. Just as a potter has the right to determine what form the clay will take, so God has the right to deal with sinful humanity with both wrath and mercy. He's sovereign. No one tells him what to do.

This is the lesson Job had to learn. All these bad things happen to Job for what seems to him to be no reason at all. Job complains to God that he's done nothing to deserve such poor treatment. But God says to Job, "Who are you to question me?" Then God asks Job all kinds of questions like, "**Where were you when I created the heavens and the earth?**" Finally, Job repents in dust and ashes, and says, "**Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know**" (Job 42:3).

The second way he responds to this is to point out that while God is the author of our salvation, **we** are the authors of our damnation:

What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (verses 22-24).

If God "bore with patience the objects of his wrath," that means evil people aren't made evil by God. No, he's patient with them. Even when he says they're "prepared for destruction" he doesn't say that God prepared them for that. Contrast that with v. 23 where he says God did prepare the objects of his mercy for glory. So, if anyone is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God's.

Imagine five friends of yours are planning to rob a bank. You find out about it and plead with them not to do it. But they push you out of the way and they start for the bank. You tackle one of them and wrestle him to the ground. The others go ahead, rob the bank, a guard is killed, they're all captured, convicted, sentenced. The one man who wasn't involved is free. So let me ask you: Whose fault was it the other men were convicted? It was theirs. But this other man who's walking around free can't say, "I'm a free man because I'm such a good guy." The only reason he's free is because you restrained him. So those who perish have no one to blame but themselves, and those who are saved have no one to praise but Christ. In that way, salvation is all grace from start to finish

God Foretold All This in Scripture

Notice Paul ended that section by saying God has now called people from both Jews and Gentiles. Next he quotes several Old Testament prophets to show this has always been his plan:

As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," and, "In the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'children of the living God.'" Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.

For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality." It is just as Isaiah said previously: "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah" (verses 25-29).

He first quotes Hosea to show God always planned to include the Gentiles among his people. God delights to take those he once called "not my people" and make them into "my people." It's like, "Hey, don't you know God has always been one who blesses those who don't deserve it?"

Then he quotes from Isaiah to show how almost the opposite is true. Even though they're called God's people, only a remnant will believe in Jesus and be God's people. It seems God never intended to bless every individual in Israel, but only a portion. In fact, Paul says it was only God's mercy that kept Israel from being completely destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah was. That's what they deserved!

So we have sort of a topsy-turvy situation where many of the so-called people of God aren't God's people, and many of those who weren't God's people are God's people. Paul depicts this again in verses 30-32a,

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.

So the Gentiles who cared less about righteousness obtained it by faith, while the Jews who did care about it forfeited it because they tried to earn it. If you think about it, that's how it works with a lot of people today. In fact, that's how it worked with me. I grew up without any concern at all for righteousness or for God. There were a few Christians on my high school campus, and I ridiculed them. But right before I graduated my sin sort of caught up to me. I got sick of it. I felt spiritually empty and thirsted to know more about Jesus. I ended up coming to him and, yes, I received the righteousness that's by faith. Meanwhile, I know a lot of kids who grew up in religious homes and tried really hard to be good and righteous, avoiding all the bad stuff I did. But they often had a smug and condescending attitude towards people like me and a feeling they deserved God's blessings and favor. Those people are often offended by the gospel of grace. It's just too easy, like, you mean a criminal can just believe the gospel and be saved? So they stumble over the very thing meant to save them. Look at verses 32b-33,

They stumbled over the stumbling stone. As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble

and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame."

Here's another quote from Isaiah. The stone religious people stumble over is Jesus. The reason they stumble over him is their own self-righteousness. They think they can earn God's favor. But the ones who know their sin and understand they have no hope but the grace of God in Christ, they'll never be put to shame.

Paul has been emphasizing God's sovereignty in salvation, but he ends here on a note of human responsibility. The question he leaves us with is **not**, "Am I one of God's chosen," but rather, "What do I do with Jesus?" There are only two options. He is the Rock: you either stumble over him or you take your stand on him. But he's available to all, Jew and Gentile alike. If you trust in him, then you're chosen. Scripture never says to try to determine if you're chosen. It just says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." That's always been his plan because it's not about race but grace.

There's an old illustration of how God's sovereignty and human responsibility work together that might help: Think of two ropes going through two holes in the ceiling and over a pulley above. If you wish to support yourself by them, you must cling to them both. If you cling only to one and not the other, you go down. In the same way, we read what the Bible says about God's election, predestination, his chosen, and so on. But then we also read verses urging people to make a choice, to exercise their freedom and responsibility as human beings. These seeming contradictions can't be reconciled by our puny human minds. So what do we do? With childlike faith, we cling to both ropes, fully confident that in eternity we'll see both strands of truth are, after all, of one piece.

But this is hard stuff. This isn't milk, this is meat, and some people who aren't ready for it will choke on it. If I could leave you with one thought it would be this: Let God be God! He has that right. You don't have to figure everything out. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, "**The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.**" There are some things you won't be able to figure out. Like Job, you'll want to accuse God of wrong. But God says, "Let me do my job. The things I have revealed to you are enough. You can trust me for the rest."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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