



# An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

## (9) God's Sovereign Prerogative in Salvation and Damnation

Roman 9

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September 2, 2018

Romans 9. In our series on the letter of Paul to the Romans, one chapter per sermon, we have come to chapter 9. This starts a new section in the letter which includes chapters 9-11. So, we have the introduction which is 1:1-17. We have the section on sin and the wrath of God which is 1:18-3:20. We have the section on justification by faith which is 3:21-4:25. Then there is a section which deals with a number of facets of salvation many of them having to do with how God changes us to live holy lives which is chapters 5-8.

Now we come to a new section in Paul's letter to the Romans and this one has to do with the fact that most of the Jewish people did not accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour. There were a relatively small number of Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Most of the converts were Gentiles. And that was an enormous theological problem because the Jews were God's chosen people during the period of time covered by the Old Testament, at least from Genesis 12 on. And God had made all kinds of promises to this people – promises having to do with the end of the world – promises of everlasting love – promises addressed to Israel. For instance, in Deuteronomy 4:31 God says to Israel, "For the LORD your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them."

These Old Testament promises were fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ, but when the larger part of Israel did not accept Jesus as the

Saviour whom God had promised in the Old Testament, it raised the question concerning God's faithfulness to those promises to Israel. Chapters 9 – 11 deal with this issue, the role of Israel in the purposes of God in the light of the fact that most of Israel did not embrace Jesus as Saviour.

Now this section is relevant and important for you for a number of reasons. The Old Testament people of Israel are your spiritual ancestors because through faith you are spiritual descendent of Abraham. This history is your history and it is a foundational history for your understanding of who you are as a child of God. The story of Israel is also your story and it is the story that gives meaning to your life. This is not just some esoteric theological subject of interest only to ivory tower theologians. This is directly relevant to your life. Furthermore, the answers to this question about why so many in Israel did not believe in Jesus teach us a lot about God and his relationship to his people and the nature of salvation. These chapters deal with some very significant truths that inform our knowledge of God and his way of salvation in a number of profound and important and practical ways.

So, chapter 9. In the first 5 verses, Paul expresses his anguish because the fact that most of his fellow-Jews had not accepted the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. He says, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

Now this is tremendously significant for us because it underscores how serious the message of the gospel is. When so many of his fellow-Jews rejected the good news of salvation in Christ, Paul did not just shrug his shoulders and say, "Oh well – too bad – their loss." He is devastated. He has "great sorrow and unceasing anguish in [his] heart." This is because he loves these people and he knows that without Christ they are eternally lost. Paul is vividly aware of both the temporal and eternal consequences of rejecting Christ. This is in fact the greatest possible catastrophe that anyone can bring upon themselves. To reject Christ is to remain under the wrath of God and those who die in that state perish in hell forever. Apart from Christ, life is a living death and it ends with

eternal death. There is no greater disaster that anyone can ever experience. That is why Paul sorrows so deeply at the thought that so many of his beloved countrymen have rejected Christ.

This is the same reason that we so often get prayer requests for unsaved loved ones. If you love someone and you know that they are heading for an eternity of suffering apart from God, that will weigh heavily on your mind and heart. That is what is going on here in the first verses of Romans 9. Salvation is the issue of all issues. There is nothing more important for someone's well-being than their status before God. For someone to reject God and to live for the pleasures of this life instead of the far deeper and richer pleasures of life with God is a great disaster. These verses remind us that we should live with an awareness of what is at stake in life. Life is serious business. The consequences of rejecting God are horrific beyond imagining.

In verses 4-6 Paul lists some of the blessings that the people of Israel had received. They were a people greatly favored by God. "[T]o them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenant, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever." These people had been richly favored by God. And the question Paul is going to address is whether God had been unfaithful to his word since most of them would not receive the salvation that he had promised to them.

Here is the beginning of Paul's answer. The first part of his answer is that God had made a distinction within Israel right from the beginning. Not all of the children of Abraham were included in the line of promise. First of all, Isaac was chosen to be the bearer of the promise and not Ishmael. The principle that determines who belongs to God's saved people is not biology, but God's choice. Paul illustrates this by referring to God's choice of Jacob over Esau. "Verse 13 says, "As it is written Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." The principle, as Paul expresses it in verse 6 is, "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel."

Paul here is establishing the principle of the primacy of God's choice in salvation. Isaac is chosen and not Ishmael. Jacob is chosen and not Esau. Paul's point is that it was never God's intention to save all of the

offspring of Abraham. Right from the beginning God was choosing some and rejecting others. And what is emphasized about the choice is the free and sovereign nature of that choice. God chose Jacob and rejected Esau before either of them had been born, before either of them had done anything good or bad. God's choice was not based on anything outside of himself. It is God's choice that is emphasized.

Now the fact that God chooses some and rejects others raises the question of fairness. Is it fair or just of God to choose some to salvation and to reject others? Was it proper for God to love Jacob and hate Esau before either of them had even been born? Questions of justice and equity are of interest in every generation. It was of interest in Paul's time because he anticipates this question in his presentation of the gospel and spends a lot of time answering it. It is also of interest in our time.

There are many discussions and debates about matters of justice and equality. Most of those discussions and debates today are man-centered. They do not take God and his word into account. That leads to a kind of discussion that assumes that man is the measure of all things. The Bible in general and Paul's discussion of justice and fairness here deals with the matter in the light of God and his word. Man is not at the center. God is.

So, Paul asks the question, "Is there injustice on God's part? Another way of asking this question would be to ask whether God is obligated to treat people equally. For he certainly did not treat Jacob and Esau equally. Jacob was loved and chosen. Esau was hated and rejected. Was God unjust to be so unequal in his treatment these two people. Paul's answer is "By no means?" God is not unjust to treat Jacob and Esau unequally. To support his answer Paul quotes God himself. He quotes words that God spoke to Moses which are recorded in Exodus 33:19. "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

God asserts his sovereign prerogative to treat people in an unequal manner. He is God. And he has no obligation to treat all people in the same manner, so he is in his right to show mercy and compassion to some and to withhold mercy and compassion to others.

This claim of God teaches us that there is an important distinction to be made between justice and equality. God is just. In many places in his word, God claims to be just and righteous in all his ways. Justice has to do with treating people as they deserve to be treated. God is obligated to treat people fairly, but not because of some principle of justice that exists outside of God, for there is nothing greater than God to which he must conform. He is the standard. And he is just in his very nature and his own nature requires that he treat people justly. And God's claim here is that his justice does not require him to choose everyone for salvation. Esau had no claim on God to be chosen for salvation. He did not have a right to be chosen.

Jacob had no right to be chosen either. He was chosen simply because God set his love on him and decided to choose him. God asserts his sovereign right to choose those to whom he will show mercy and to reject showing mercy to others. This whole perspective begins with God and looks at the whole matter from the truth about who God is. He is God. And he emphasizes and asserts his prerogative show mercy to some and not to show mercy to others and we who are God's creatures are expected to define our concepts of justice and fairness on the basis of God's character and actions and words. God is the one who defines reality. We simply discern what is true by discovering God's truth.

So, in dealing with the question of why so many of the people of Israel did not accept Jesus and whether God was being unfaithful to his promises because of that, Paul points out that right from the beginning of Israel's history God has been choosing some and rejecting others. That is what was happening in New Testament times as well in that only a few Jews were being saved and many Gentiles. God was showing mercy on those to whom he decided to show mercy and he is perfectly just in doing so.

Paul expresses the implication of this for salvation in verse 16, "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." This is fundamental to our understanding of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is distributed according to God's will. It does not depend on anything in us. God does not choose one person and reject another person because the first person caught his attention by trying hard or

being a good person or whatever. “[I]t depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” Notice again that God has a very God-centered way of looking at things.

Paul makes this point even more starkly in the next few verses. He brings up the case of Pharaoh from the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. One of the things that make people uncomfortable about the story of Pharaoh and the ten plagues is that a number of times it says that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Paul quotes from God’s own speech from the book of Exodus where God through Moses addresses Pharaoh and says, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” And then Paul summarizes the principle in verse 18, “So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”

So not only does God not choose to have mercy on Pharaoh, he actually hardens his heart so that he will resist God so that God can show his power in delivering his people from Pharaoh’s grip so that the story will be told throughout the ancient world of how the God of the Israelites overwhelmed the most powerful king in the world at that time. God is not ashamed of doing this. He does not shuffle it to the side in the hope that it will not be noticed. He makes it clear in the original telling of the story and now his servant Paul does the same thing by repeating it in his letter to the Romans which will be included in the New Testament as the inspired word of God. This belongs to the glory and the perfection of God.

But this raises another question. This whole subject tends to do that – that is raise questions. Paul imagines someone asking, “Why does he [God] still find fault? For who can resist his will?” In other words, how can it be right for God to judge Pharaoh as a sinner, if God himself has hardened Pharaoh’s heart. If God raised up Pharaoh to be God’s enemy so that God could demonstrate his power by defeating the enemy that he himself raised up, how can God possibly blame Pharaoh for being an enemy of God?

And this is Paul’s answer? Verses 20-21 “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have

you made me like this? Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" In dealing with these kinds of questions we must remember who God is and who we are. God is the creator. God made us. We have no existence apart from God. It is absolutely necessary that we remember who God is and who we are in every situation, including situations where God's ways raise questions in our minds and hearts.

This is one of the most important truths that we can ever learn and internalize and be shaped by. God is the potter. We are the clay. That does not mean that we may never ask questions of God as the Psalms and the book of Job make abundantly clear. But we may never forget the infinitely great significance of the creator/creature distinction. God is the creator of all things including us. We are the work of his hands. He made us. He owns us. And because of that he has the right to choose some people to demonstrate his mercy and others to demonstrate his wrath.

Verses 22-23 express this idea. "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for his glory...."

This verse is saying that some people are "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction." God endures such people with patience because he desires "to show his wrath and to make known his power." He also does it because he wants to "make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy...." So, some people are created by the potter as "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction ... to show forth [God's] wrath and power." And others are created by the potter as "vessels of mercy" ... "to make known the riches of [God's] glory" in their salvation.

Now there are things that can be said here to make this truth less stark and blunt than it is expressed here. For instance, the Bible also insists that everyone God punishes, deserves to be punished. That is a huge emphasis in the Bible. But it is interesting and significant that Paul does not bring that up here. He does not try to soften this hard truth as I have just tried to do by mentioning that people who perish deserve to

perish. And we should learn from this that the truth that Paul is expressing in these verses is not a truth that reflects badly on God in any way. It is a difficult truth for us to fathom and to accept, but it is not something that God is hesitant to declare plainly and bluntly without adding a lot of provisos and explanations.

What God through Paul is telling us plainly in this passage is “I am the potter. You are the clay. I have the right to take some of the clay and make it into a pot to be destroyed and I have the right to take some of the clay and make it into a pot to be loved and cherished. Period. I am God. This is my prerogative as the creator.”

This is the God of the Bible. This is the God we are to love and serve for all that he is and all that he does. The bottom line is “[W]ho are you, O man, to answer back to God?”

In the remaining verses of this chapter, Paul applies what he has been saying to the question that he is addressing, namely, why it is that so many of the Jewish people did not believe on Jesus. He makes the point that God had chosen many Gentiles as “vessels of mercy.” He quotes from Hosea to show that God had planned to save many Gentiles all the way along. Verse 25, “As indeed he says in Hosea, ‘Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people’ and her who was not beloved I will call beloved.’” Then he quotes from Isaiah to show that already in Old Testament times only a small number of the people of Israel were actually saved. Verse 27, “And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved....’”

So, what was happening in that most of the Jews were rejecting Jesus and many of the Gentiles were believing in him was not something that should have been surprising. The Old Testament had spoken of both of these things.

And in the final few verses, he makes the point that the way of salvation through believing in Jesus is a “stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.” The strange thing is that the Gentiles who had never tried to earn God’s favor through keeping the law more readily embraced the righteousness of Christ received by faith and for the Jews who had

pursued being right with God through their own works, the way of salvation through Jesus was offensive. And there was something intentional about this on the part of God. Paul quotes God from the Old Testament speaking about Jesus by way of prophecy, “Behold I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Our God is a surprising God. He does not conform to our ideas of how a God should act and pursue his purposes. And much of what he does is designed to humble us, to put us in our place and to prick the bubble of our pretentiousness and our pride. The way of salvation that God has designed is offensive to us in many ways. This is by design. The way of salvation through Jesus is designed to be a “stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.”

And the only way to receive it is to humble ourselves before God. If we are saved it is because we have been chosen without any reference to anything desirable about us. If we have been saved it is because God has chosen us to examples of his mercy. Our salvation is in no way because of us and its main purpose is the glory of God. And even the way of wellbeing and blessing is to focus not on ourselves, but on God and on delighting in worshipping and serving him.

We receive salvation by acknowledging that we have nothing to contribute and are completely dependent upon God for everything. The way of salvation is radically humbling. God is at the center. His glory is the purpose for everything. We exist, and we are saved for God and not for ourselves. The way of salvation is designed to drive home that point. And that is why it is so offensive to us unless we are miraculously humbled to see and embrace our place as the clay of the potter whose only purpose is to give glory to the potter.

And, strange as that might seem, that that is the most blessed and fulfilling and joyful way to live. John the Baptist understood this when people started coming to Jesus to be baptized instead of coming to him. John was being marginalized. What did he say? John 3:28-30, “... I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore, this joy

of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.” That my friends is joy. “He must increase, but I must decrease.” That is the joy that salvation is designed to produce.