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# The Gospel: The Purposes of God in Election

## Romans 9:1-33

As we approach the next three chapters in Romans, I want to set watchwords over our hearts:

- Gratefulness for what we have learned. We must never come to a point where what God has taught us fuels pride, arrogance and a condescending tone to others.
- Generosity with those who are having an honest struggle, but are engaged with the text of the Word of God. Let us ever be mindful that most of us came to what we believe through a struggle as well.
- Guarding what we must teach, with conviction and without compromise. We must never treat truth as though it does not matter. It does. And it is not arrogant to say, "This is what the Bible says and teaches."
- Graciousness when opposed knowing that our responsibility is to teach and instruct and then wait on God to change hearts.

Remember, sometimes hearing truth in a single message is like the taking a photo of my wife and making a line drawing...

Now, does this mean that we proclaim truth without passion and conviction? Certainly not. We have a responsibility to be passionate and persuasive. At the end of the day, the argument is with the Scripture. What we aim for more than anything is to show what the Scripture is saying here.

So, how did we get *here*? Why these topics at this point? Paul has just discussed the absolute certainty of God's love and unfailing faithfulness to His people. So the question could quite naturally arise, "So what happened to Israel? Why has God rejected Israel and turned to the Gentiles. Isn't what you have said in Romans 8 either not true or it means that your placing the Jew and Gentile on equal footing is not true. How will you solve this problem?"

Romans 9-11 is a Theodicy. It is Paul's defense of God, His personal love and covenantal faithfulness and sovereign initiative in people's lives.

## The Humble Perspective

(v.1-5)

Paul sets the tone here in his public grief over Israel's lost privileges. There is no arrogant triumphalism, but humble pity and deep regret.

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—<sup>2</sup> that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. <sup>5</sup> To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

## The Attitude of Paul

(v.1-3)

Paul's attitude reflects that which is commended to us in Jude 22, *"But you, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on those who doubt; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh."* [ESV]

He affirms his attitude against those who would accuse him as the apostle to the Gentiles of arrogance (v.1-2). He truly cares what happens to the Jews – and affirms this with an oath and an assurance. This is so important to him that he is willing to be accursed from Christ for their sake (v.3). In this he follows Moses on Mt. Sinai who intervenes and intercedes for God's people.

In the midst of this, he begins immediately by making a distinction – by clearly identifying who he is concerned for. It is those who are his kinsman in the realm of the flesh. He is talking about a national and ethnic identify – he is talking about Jews. This is going to unfold as a very important distinction as he unpacks God's purposes in election.

## The Advantage of the Jews

(v.4-5)

Now, even though they are on the same footing as Gentiles, they are not without their special privileges. He lists them here. They have been adopted as God's Son as we see in Exodus 4:21-23, *"And the Lord said to Moses, 'When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. 22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, 23 and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me.' If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'"* [ESV]. The allusion here to adoption is meant to take us back to this in Exodus because it is the foundation on which he builds his argument. We will find more references to it as we move forward.

The Jews had the glory of God dwelling among and the covenants to bind them to their God. They had the Law of God as their charter of life along with its directions for worship and its provisions and promises. Their privilege involved having the Fathers (patriarchs) and the great Son, the Messiah, God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Again that phrase, in or according to the flesh – Paul is their kin and Jesus the Messiah is their King. For the Jews, here is the gospel – the Messiah would be both human (according to the flesh) and Sovereign God (God over all). And He is the recognized and blessed one from God .

As D.A. Carson writes, "The privileges that Paul has enumerated all stem from God himself and could be taken to guarantee – indeed, were taken by many Jews to guarantee – the

salvation of Jews generally. It is this salvation that the gospel specifically calls into question (see *e.g.* ch. 2), and, by doing so, raises the issue that is central to these chapters: has God abandoned his promises to Israel (6a)?” [New Bible Commentary].

## The Foundational Principles

(v.6-13)

There are two foundational principles that uphold the faithfulness of God to His people. It is not as though God’s Word had failed. Confidence in God’s promises are sustained by understanding who God’s people truly are and how God is working out His purposes.

### The Identification of God’s People

(v.6-9)

First, we must know who God’s people really are.

<sup>6</sup> But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, <sup>7</sup> and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” <sup>8</sup> This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. <sup>9</sup> For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return and Sarah shall have a son.”

The Jews assumed that their national/ethnic descent from Abraham automatically included them in all the promises God had made. Paul shows that this is not so.

So, he states the principle: *not everyone who descended from Abraham are the true children of promise*. Physical descent is not the qualification. It is not a mere matter of heredity or parentage. This is demonstrated by showing from Genesis 21:12 that Isaac was the child of promise, not Ishmael although both were the physical descendents of Abraham.

In Galatians 3, Paul shows how we who have been placed into Christ are now Abraham’s offspring and heirs in the sphere of promise. “*But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.*” [ESV]. That Isaac is the son of promise is demonstrated from Genesis 17:21.

So God’s Word has not failed because God’s people are those who are counted as offspring because they are in the line of the promise. It is not according to physical descent—not Ishmael – but according to promise – Isaac.

### The Instruction on God’s Purposes

(v.10-13)

Now certainly, every Jew would agree with Paul up to this point. And every Jew would recognize and loudly affirm that Ishmael is excluded from the line of promise. But what about everyone born to Isaac? Are they all in the line of promise as well? If all are, then aren’t all Israelites automatically in as well? And if some are not, then on what basis are they excluded or the ones saved, included? These are the questions that Paul moves on to answer.

<sup>10</sup> And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, <sup>11</sup> though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of

his call— <sup>12</sup> she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” <sup>13</sup> As it is written, f“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

The next narrowing of God’s people is among those who would normally be according to promise. Rebekah has twins, Esau and Jacob. Both of them are in the line of Isaac, are according to promise and have the same mother. Yet, one is chosen and the other is not. Jacob is on the one through whom the line of God’s true people continues. Jacob is the one who has a personal salvation and a corporate unity with God’s people.

And this choice happens before they were born, before they did good or evil, before they did any works. God has a purpose He is working and He chooses individually and corporately so that His purposes are accomplished and fulfilled. Part of God’s purpose is to highlight His own initiative – He is the one choosing and calling – so that man cannot boast.

Paul underwrites this as a proof of God’s faithful and unchangeable love by quoting from Malachi 1:2-3, “‘I have loved you,’ says the Lord. But you say, ‘How have you loved us?’ ‘Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ declares the Lord. ‘Yet I have loved Jacob 3 but Esau I have hated.’ [ESV]. Notice that Israel was questioning the love of God in Malachi. God’s response is to point to His unchanging and steadfast love in election. He loved them – how were they to know for sure? Because he had demonstrated that love by choosing and loving Jacob and not choosing and hating Esau.

Now, many commentators and theologians say that Paul is talking about corporate election, not personal. They argue that Paul has in mind the nation of Israel and the movement of redemptive history through the corporate. Others say that salvation is not in view here, rather national/ethnic identification as the people of God. However, the problem with that is Paul has declared the love of God for individuals in Romans 8 and uses individuals in Romans 9 as evidence that God’s word and promises have not failed. Yes, there are corporate ramifications – but in the Bible a corporate body is always made up of real human beings as individuals. Thus, Israel are a people. And the church are a people in Christ. But a people is the plural of a person – individuals considered together.

So God’s people are according to His promise and according to His purposes. Individually and thus corporately, we are His because of His Covenant faithfulness and His Choosing purposes. Therefore, His Word has not failed because of His effective promises (v.6-9) and His elective purposes (v.10-13).

## The Challenging Problems

(v.14-26)

Now certainly, this raises problems, questions and sometimes, loud and vociferous challenges. Paul anticipates them and responds to them.

Most people who object to the doctrine of election do so along the lines of one or both of these categories. Further, if your doctrine of election does not raise these objections or is not vulnerable to these two objections, then your doctrine of election cannot be said to be the same as Paul's. I am not saying this to be arrogant or condescending – I am saying this because this is exactly how Paul anticipates people will respond to what he has just written.

Both of these objections are connected to what he has taught with the phrase, "What shall we say, then..."

### God is not fair to us...

(v.14-18)

<sup>14</sup> What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! <sup>15</sup> For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." <sup>16</sup> So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. <sup>17</sup> For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "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." <sup>18</sup> So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

### The Objection Stated

Paul recognizes that people will say that this is not just. In our modern day, because we fail to distinguish between humanistic fairness and Biblically oriented justice, we say, "This isn't fair. Your doctrine of election is not fair because Esau (and by implication, other people) don't have a chance or an opportunity to accept or reject God."

When we say this, we are accusing God of injustice or we are establishing a standard of justice that is different from God's and then rejecting what Paul is teaching based on that. Paul is emphatic that what he has just taught is not contrary to God's justice. This is not a world in which everyone having an equal opportunity to accept or reject God is the standard for fairness. This is very hard for us, particularly when our sense of social justice runs so much along the track of equal opportunity. Equal opportunity is an illusion, both socially and spiritually. And to raise it up and charge God with injustice or to reject election as true because of it is not wise.

### The Response Developed

This is why Paul responds as he does. What is interesting to us is that as he develops his response, he actually ratchets up the emotion factor.

Listen to what he says: God is free to show mercy and to harden whomever he chooses. He did this with Pharaoh. And God did it in order to accomplish His purpose and to proclaim His Name. Now we have to stop and think about what Paul is saying. God is sovereignly free to give mercy to anyone He chooses and is under no obligation to show mercy to anyone. He shows mercy and hardens according to the good pleasure of His will. He does this to demonstrate His power and to declare His character. Remember that the name of God is the label for His character.

So, to those who say, "It is not fair," Paul responds by saying, "God is free – free to show His mercy to whomever he wishes so that He is glorified – His power and character are acknowledged and acclaimed."

### **God cannot blame us...**

**(v.19-26)**

When we respond to "It is not fair" with "God is free", then that leads to the next objection.

<sup>19</sup> You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" <sup>20</sup> 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?" <sup>21</sup> Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use? <sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— <sup>24</sup> even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? <sup>25</sup> 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.'" <sup>26</sup> "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

### **The Objection Stated**

If God is doing whatever He wants, then how can He hold us accountable? See how Paul puts this objection: "Why does He still find fault. After all, who can resist God's will?"

I understand how easy it is to wonder if God is choosing to love and save and show mercy on whomever He chooses, then why am I at fault? Why is it that Pharaoh just cannot stand before God and say that the reason he was not saved (or others are not saved) is because God did not choose him and in fact was actively involved in hardening him. I mean, Esau not only didn't have a chance to repent and be saved, but Pharaoh is being hardened by God!

### **The Response Developed**

Well, Paul's response to this objection is quite forthright and unsympathetic. Basically, who are we to object to the way God is and to the way He has ordained things to be? To put it crudely, who are we to even raise such an objection!

He clearly illustrates the nature of reality by using the potter and the clay. It is absurd that the clay should challenge the power, wisdom and purpose of the potter to do with the clay as He chooses. Doesn't God have the right to do what He wants: to make this clay into any sort of pot He chooses? Would we actually say, "No, God must make all pots equally alike and save those who respond to Him," with the emphasis on **MUST**? Do you really think you are going to tell God what He is supposed to be like and what the world is supposed to be like?

Now listen to me – I am trying to represent Paul accurately here. I am not trying to over speak this. Look at the text – isn't this what Paul is saying? This is not arrogance or condescending. It is simply the way Paul states his response. It seems to me that

while we need to be generous to those who have an honest struggle, those same people need to be generous with us who are wanting to be honest with God's Word, even in the hard texts. I almost wish I could skip the next few verse, but they are integral to Paul's argument and his response.

Now we sense that Paul knows how hard what he is about to say is to swallow. He makes it a question, a "what if." Now he is not proposing this as a possibility, but as the certain nature of the case. How do I know that? Because he supports from the Scripture, citing Hosea. So here is the surprise: rather than softening the argument, he actually presses it home in a harder, more difficult way.

Let me summarize what Paul is saying here as best I can. God will show His own glory in greater way by showing mercy on some vessels while showing a lesser, but no less real glory in His wrath on the other vessels. What is highlighted is not the outpouring of His wrath, but His long patient endurance of their rebellion and resistance to Him. While His mercy is highlighted as He moves to save those totally undeserving vessels He has chosen to love.

Paul does not shy away from saying that each of these vessels were prepared for the end they suffer or enjoy. If God is free in His mercy and sovereign in His power and purposes, then He is free to do this as well. He concludes with the quote from Hosea to show that God will call a people, the Gentiles, His people. And in the Scripture where the Gentiles were set apart from the Jews as not the people of God, He has set forth that they will be called the sons of God.

At the end of the day, this free mercy of God and His sovereign power and purposes place the Jew and Gentile on the same footing. And this is the lesson we all need to learn and hear and imbed deeply in our hearts. That God saves anyone is sheer mercy and grace. He is under no obligation to save anyone. He could have let us simply go on in our sin to the destruction we justly deserved. But He has revealed Himself as a sovereign and merciful God. Rather than turning away from the God who has revealed Himself to be like this, we should embrace His mercy shown to Jew and Gentile in His effectual promises and elective purposes.

**The Final Proof****(v.27-33)**

The final proof that this is an individual and eschatological salvation is offered in the citation from Isaiah 10:22-23.

**Its Scriptural Content****(v.27-29)**

<sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay." <sup>29</sup> And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."

Here is the proof that God is moving to save a remnant, a select group from within Israel. No matter how large the nation may be physically, only a few will be saved. And if God does not save this few, then the nation will be utterly destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now, as we move from here into Romans 10-11, Paul has just defined for us who Israel is. It is not the church. And it is not just those who have descended from Abraham or Isaac. It is a remnant of Jews who will be saved by being a part of the body of Christ so that in the last day, every son of Abraham will stand before the God of the whole earth who declare them justified on the account of Christ and chosen by His loving and sure mercies.

**Its Summary Conclusion****(v.30-33)**

So, what do we say in conclusion?

<sup>30</sup> What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; <sup>31</sup> but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. <sup>32</sup> Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, <sup>33</sup> as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

Well, he picks up again that ever present thread in Romans: salvation and justification in God's sight are by faith and not by works. Faith is placed at the center. The Gentiles who were unconcerned about having a right standing with God received it through faith. And national/ethnic Israel did not receive it because they pursued it by works.

God has purposed to place Jesus Christ as the central object of faith and trust. The Jews stumble over that because their trust is in law works. Those who do believe, do so because God has taken the initiative in mercy and love to choose, call, justify and glorify them. Thus, His word does not fail. His love is steadfast and abiding. And His people are saved by faith in Christ, whoever they are.



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## Reflect and Respond

Now, let me close this with a summary of Romans 9 that reflects what it teaches, does not contradict other texts, proclaims the power and character and fame of God so that we will believe and bow, so that we will not run away from Him but run to Him.

- There is a distinction between the physical descendents of Abraham with their advantages and the spiritual children of Abraham with their election salvation.
- This distinction exists because of God's purposes in election.
- This election is personal (Isaac/Ishmael/Esau/Jacob, Pharaoh) while having corporate and eschatological realities.
- Election taught Biblically will raise two objections:
  - ❶ God is not fair and ❷ God shouldn't blame us;which are answered:
  - ❶ God is free to show mercy as He chooses;
  - ❷ God is sovereign and free to glorify Himself as He pleases.
- Election is aimed to show God's glory:
  - ❶ In a lesser, but still authentic way through His wrath on the lost highlighting His holiness and justice;
  - ❷ in a greater and magnificent way through His freely choosing whom he would save highlighting His love and mercy.
- Election magnifies God and illuminates His glory because it is extended to all people groups - narrower for the Jews in the remnant but broader as it includes the Gentiles.
- The point is to demonstrate that righteousness comes faith, not by worth or works.
- All this is to place Christ at the center of God's grace and glory.

So, I call you to believe in and bow to the God of the Bible. O, love Him for His mercy. Flee to Him for His grace. And Christian, marvel and worship Him for the freeness of His mercy and everlasting love that has been shown to you as He has chosen you, called you, justified you and will one day, glorify you.

**Soli Deo Gloria.**

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## Notes