

The Only Means of Access
Romans 9:1–16

There's a story of a professional golfer who liked to hustle amateurs for money on the side. One day he was approached by a man wearing dark glasses and walking with a cane. The man offered to play him for \$100 per hole. Well, the pro golfer just scoffed and said, *"I can't play you! You're blind, aren't you?"* The man said, *"I am blind. But before my sight became impaired, I was a state champ. I think I can beat you."*

Now it turned out that the pro golfer needed the money. Playing a man who was blind was low, even for him, but having such an obvious advantage, it was an opportunity that he couldn't pass up. So he said, *"Ok, you'll lose your money, but don't say I didn't warn you. When would you like to play?"* The blind man then replied, *"Any night will do, any night at all."*

We prefer to have an advantage – to have a leg up if we can – don't we? Of course, there's nothing wrong with making the most of the advantages that you have. But often, when we have an advantage of some kind, we will begin to take it for granted.

We can even develop a sense of entitlement. We begin to believe that because of our advantages in life, we "deserve" certain things that, in reality, we don't deserve. We do this even with God.

That is one of the issues addressed in the book of Romans. Members of the covenant community – what today we call "the church" – have so many privileges or blessings that come with living among God's people. But we're naturally prone to believing that because we have these blessings, God owes us something when, in fact, He does not. In and of ourselves, we don't deserve God's blessing, much less His salvation.

Jesus Christ, however, is deserving. Philippians 2 tells us that Christ was entitled to all glory and honor. God the Son took on human form, thereby possessing both his divine nature and now a human nature as well. Yet He willingly became like a servant, humbling Himself to redeem sinners.

Christ is entitled to every blessing found in the holy presence of the one true God. In His human nature, He earned those blessings – He earned salvation. And only in and through Christ Himself could any of us ever draw near to God. None of our advantages in life give us a leg up for salvation. We must have Jesus.

So what then is the purpose of the many privileges of life in the covenant community? What good are they to us? The first part of Romans 9 helps us understand. Notice the outline there on page 6 in the WG. The privileges of the covenant community are God-given means of learning about Him, but the privileges are not the God-given means of access to Him. The distinction between learning about God and access to Him is essential in Christian belief and understanding. Nowhere is that clearer than in Romans 9. But let me explain.

Romans 9 begins to address a certain question. If the Israelites/Hebrews/Jews were God's chosen people, then how could so many find themselves separated from God? In earlier chapters of Romans – 2 through 4 especially – the apostle Paul labors to explain that there are not two ways of salvation. He goes on to explain in Romans 10 and 11, which we will look at in the coming weeks, that there are not two peoples of God.

And as a result, there are not two futures for two different people groups of God. This is extremely important for our upcoming sermons on the NT book of Revelation because Revelation is often wrongly interpreted based on that misunderstanding.

Now, Romans chapters 1-8 proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ for sinners. Paul declares that Jesus came into the world to save people of every race and nationality. He explains that all mankind is sinful and without hope save in God's sovereign mercy. That mercy is shown in the saving work of Christ, which we receive by grace through faith. And Paul ends chapter 8 with this glorious declaration: *"I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

And then immediately, he makes the statement you see there in ch.9, verse 1, *"I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—[2] that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."* He's just made what is one of the most exhilarating announcements in all of Scripture. And yet his heart is truly broken. He feels real pain. Why?

Because so many of his fellow Jews believed that they were entitled to life in God, to salvation, to eternity with God because of their ethnicity, because of their nationality, their birth and their upbringing. And Paul realizes that because of this false belief and false sense of entitlement, they are cut off from God.

That's why he says, verse [3] *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.* "According to the flesh" in this context means "according to human birth." This is placed in opposition to rebirth by the power of the Holy Spirit – birth "according to the Spirit." No one but Christ Himself could give their life for the salvation of another. And without a doubt, Paul knows that. He knows that. But you see, this is real love.

Do you have such a broken heart for those whom you know and love who do not have Christ? We should not numb our hearts. We should pray – pray for their salvation and trust God. We should pray and surrender to God's holy will, but it should hurt to see someone cut off from God.

Well then Paul goes into this list in verse 4 describing his "kinsmen." He says, [4] *"They are Israelites."* Now, we've just finished Genesis, which, among other things, describes the establishment of the covenant of grace and the covenant promises that were first delivered to

one family: the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who was later renamed “Israel” by God. Hence, the Israelites. Incidentally, we had 73 Genesis sermons! There are 50 chapters, and honestly, at times I was concerned that we were going too fast!

But, throughout that time, we saw the beginning of the Israelites. Their history is much further developed in the next book, Exodus, but even still, Genesis lays the foundation for all God would do for the descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Paul says, “*They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. [5] To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ.*” Jesus Christ was born into a family descended from an Israelite named Judah. Judah was a son of Jacob – Israel! But all the other tribes and their descendants descended from Jacob/Israel as well.

This is the great ancestral history of the Jews. It is nothing less than the early history of salvation. And yet – and yet – Paul has great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart for so many of these people. Again, why? Because they have rejected – cast off and overlooked – they have dismissed, verse 5, “*the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever.*”

First of all, Jesus Christ is God come to earth. That is clear throughout the Scriptures, and here it is plainly stated. Paul has such a deep reverence Paul for Christ that he has to exclaim, “*Amen.*”

And this list that he gives is important, and briefly, I want to give an explanation of each item. “The adoption” refers to how God treated the people of Israel as a firstborn son. “The glory” refers to how the Israelites had seen God’s amazing power on display at the parting of the Red Sea, the journey to the promised land of Canaan, and since then. “The covenants” are those which God made with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.

“The giving of the law” refers to the law given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. This includes the 10 commandments. “The worship” refers to the description of the temple and how to respond to God. “The promises” are those to Abraham and the others, that they would be a people, and that God would be their God and they would be His people. Also the land promise and the promise that they would be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. “The patriarchs” is a term referring to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - those first three leaders. And then of course, from their race or ethnicity came Christ – God the Son became human.

Each of these items listed helped the covenant community learn about God. And rightly so, because the privileges of the covenant community are God-given means of learning about Him: learning His ways, His character, His purpose and plans. His way of salvation. Ancient Israel was given all these things. But so many did not truly know and love God.

How could this be? It’s because learning about God does not equate to a saving knowledge of Him. We read earlier that faith is necessary. It has always been this way. No one ever has or ever will be saved by good works - obeying the moral law – because none can perfectly obey.

That is the message of Romans 2, 3, and 4. There was apparently some confusion in Paul's day regarding this, which is understandable, because there is confusion to this day.

Some claim that Israel plays by a different set of rules when it comes to salvation. Were the Israelites promised salvation with no conditions? No – there was a condition. The condition was faith. We learned this throughout Genesis. Faith is a gift and where there is faith, righteousness is credited to a person. And this is why Paul makes his next statement, in verse 6. *“But it is not as though the word of God has failed.”* God's promise to Israel did not fall short. His purpose was not thwarted or denied somehow.

But wait – every ethnic Israelite did not believe in Jesus Christ. What do we make of that? Look at the rest of verse 6, *“For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.”* This contributes to the Reformed understanding of the visible and invisible church. The visible covenant community is all those who have made outward professions of faith and their children. It is all those who make up the covenant community that we can see. The invisible covenant community is all those among that visible church who are truly born again – those with true faith.

Ancient Israel existed in the same way. Not everyone truly believed. Paul says this is because not everyone was truly “Israel.” However, the whole nation was never rejected. There were any, whom the Scriptures call “a remnant,” who did believe. These are weighty statements by Paul, and he knows this. So he further explains, verse [7], *and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’”*

It's often overlooked that Abraham had two sons. There was another before Isaac, who was named Ishmael. Ishmael was born through a scheme of Sarah and Abraham. He was not the child of the promise, not born to Sarah. Notice verse [8] *“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.”* Again, “flesh” in this context means “natural human birth.”

This stands in contrast to “the promise.” Notice verse [9] *For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.”* This was God's guarantee that Sarah, who was thought to be incapable of having a child, would in fact bear a son to Abraham, whom they would name Isaac. This occurred by the miraculous power of God. Verse [10] *And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, [11] 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 him who calls—[12] she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”*

Isaac and his wife Rebekah conceived twin boys. In God's providence, Esau emerged from the womb just moments before Jacob, therefore, technically, Esau was older. And in the ancient world, the oldest son received preference and authority and special blessing. But it was the plan of God to do the opposite of what the world does. Again, verse [11] *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 him who calls—[12] she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” [13] As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

That last sentence is a quote from the book of Malachi, the last book of the OT. Paul anticipates a question at this point. “Is this fair?” And so he writes, verse [14], *“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!”* God is entirely just. There is no unfairness in Him. In fact, God is, in His being, among other things, justice. Humans have no business questioning the justice of God. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t call out injustice in the world. But neither should we pin that injustice on God.

And God is not unjust in His purpose of election to salvation, nor is He unjust in His application of His glorious grace, verse [15] *For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”* He quotes Exodus 33, and then concludes by summarizing, [16] *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.* What is “it?” It depends. What depends? Election to salvation.

Being saved from sin and death not based on who you are or where you were born or to whom you were born. It’s not based on anything you’ve done or not done. The privileges of the covenant community are the God-given means of learning about Him, but the privileges are not the God-given means of access to Him.

Access to God is not by human efforts, not by works or will. God’s choosing was not based on what you would or would not do in the future. No one deserves it; no one earns it. That is the meaning of “grace.” The privileges of the covenant community teach us about that grace. But those things do not achieve grace. They do not entitle us to grace. God bestows grace.

And this is the crux of Paul’s argument: that the God-given means of access to Him is the Lord Jesus Christ, period. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Him.

We have many privileges as members of the NT church today. We have the whole list that Paul gives in verses 4 and 5. Those things belong to the people of God. We have them to help us learn about God. And the NT church – which is the covenant community of God on the earth today – has the worship and the fellowship established by Jesus.

We have the preaching and reading and teaching of the Word of God.

We have prayer and singing and the giving of tithes and offerings.

We have the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

We have all these privileges as those included in the covenant community.

But these things do not provide salvation. Access to God is only through Jesus Christ. You must have Christ. It is a great privilege and advantage to have knowledge about Him. But that is not the same thing as having faith in Him.

Have you somehow been deceived into thinking that advantages equal access? As we go to this table today, it is a privilege. However, it's meant to remind us that the table is not our means of access to God. Jesus Himself is the means. He is the way.

Let's bow in prayer together.