

Defending the Character of God

Romans 9:1-29

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As we have journeyed through the book of Romans, we have encountered some difficult teachings. We have seen that every human being is sinful to our core, none of us is righteous, and we will ever turn to God in our own strength. We have seen that as descendants of Adam, we were sinful from the moment we were conceived. We have been continually reminded that we are not saved because of our goodness, but of God's grace, and because of that, we can not only enjoy a future resurrection, but a new and restored life even now—a life that embraces the freedom purchased for us by Christ. And last week we saw that because our salvation is not dependent on what we do, but what Christ has done on our behalf, we need not fear that anything can remove us from the position of right standing before the Lord. We know that God will finish the process that He started. He decided in advance who He planned to save, and He will ensure that His purposes are carried out. This is a source of great encouragement, even as we struggle a bit to fully understand it.

But those difficult concepts are nothing compared to the concepts Paul will unpack in our passage today. In these verses, Paul begins to answer the objections he anticipates to what he said at the end of Romans 8, when he talked about God calling and choosing certain people to be justified and glorified. These verses are a source of much controversy and debate, and I think Paul expected that to be the case, which is what prompted Romans 9. While I believe Paul's answers to these objections are clear, they are not what we would expect. They are likely to challenge some of your assumptions about the Lord and the way He works. My challenge to you today is to carefully listen to what Paul says and to wrestle with these statements. It may change your perspective on the Lord and change your view of yourself as well.

Paul's Heart

Paul begins by expressing his deep sorrow over the fact that many Jewish people had rejected the gospel of Christ and were therefore lost.

With Christ as my witness, I speak with utter truthfulness. My conscience and the Holy Spirit confirm it. ² My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief ³ for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them. ⁴ They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God's adopted children. God revealed his glory to them. He made covenants with them and gave them his law. He gave them the privilege of worshiping him and receiving his wonderful promises. ⁵ Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are their ancestors, and Christ himself was an Israelite as far as his human nature is concerned. And he is God, the one who rules over everything and is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. (Romans 9:1-5, NLT)

Paul says that if it were possible (though it isn't), he would trade his own salvation if it meant that his Jewish brothers and sisters could be saved. First of all, this shows that

Paul does not believe that every Jewish person would be saved—in fact, apart from Christ, Paul says they are lost. This is why his heart breaks for them.

Paul points to the fact that the Jewish people had numerous blessings: the patriarchs, the law, His promises, and even the Messiah coming from among them. And yet, Paul seems to indicate that even though they had these blessings, many of the Israelites will miss out on the blessings of salvation.

This is not a problem unique to the Jews. Being raised in a Christian household, sitting under good Christian teaching, or being a member of a solid church does not guarantee salvation. What matters is what we do with that information. Each person must decide for themselves whether they will embrace and follow Christ or not.

If you have family members who are not saved, you may understand Paul's anguish. Because of your great love for these people, you are burdened by the fact that they do not know Christ, and unless something changes, they are destined for Hell. Paul laments that these Jewish people had all the privileges of God, yet they were missing the blessing God made available to them through Jesus.

Objection 1: God Didn't Keep His Promise

This brings up the first objection Paul anticipates: that God failed to keep His promise to the people of Israel.

⁶ Well then, has God failed to fulfill his promise to Israel? No, for not all who are born into the nation of Israel are truly members of God's people! ⁷ Being descendants of Abraham doesn't make them truly Abraham's children. For the Scriptures say, "Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted," though Abraham had other children, too. ⁸ This means that Abraham's physical descendants are not necessarily children of God. Only the children of the promise are considered to be Abraham's children. ⁹ For God had promised, "I will return about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

¹⁰ This son was our ancestor Isaac. When he married Rebekah, she gave birth to twins. ¹¹ But before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad, she received a message from God. (This message shows that God chooses people according to his own purposes; ¹² he calls people, but not according to their good or bad works.) She was told, "Your older son will serve your younger son." ¹³ In the words of the Scriptures, "I loved Jacob, but I rejected Esau."
(Romans 9:6-13, NLT)

Paul's answer to this objection hinges on the correct understanding of who "Israel" really is. Paul says that simply being descendants of Abraham (which all Israelites are) does not make a person a child of God. He points to the fact that Isaac and Ishmael were both descendants of Abraham, but only one was part of the promise. Isaac was a child of God and Ishmael was not. One could argue that since Isaac was born of Sarah and Ishmael was born from Hagar, that's the reason for the difference. But the same thing happened later with Jacob and Esau, who were twins, born at the same time of the

same parents. God chose to work through Jacob (whose name later became Israel) rather than Esau.

Paul says that being a physical descendant of Jacob does not make a person a recipient of God's promise. He is telling us that "Israel" can also refer to all God's children. In that case, Israel does not include unbelieving Jews (who may be physical descendants of Jacob), but ironically, includes Gentiles who do believe, even though they are not physical descendants. So this passage isn't really about the Israelites, but it is pointing us to God's sovereignty in who His people are.

This becomes clear when Paul talks about how God chose Jacob instead of Esau. He chose them before they were even born. God told their mother, Rebekah, that the older would serve the younger. He didn't choose Jacob because he knew Jacob would be better (both were scoundrels at times), but because of His own divine prerogative. God doesn't explain the reason, but Paul says it was not based on what these men did.

Sometimes we try to soften this statement by concluding that God chooses people based on what He foresees they will do. We conclude that because God knows all things, even the future, He foresees what decision a person will make, and then chooses those who He knows will choose Him. But I don't think that's what Paul is saying. And that's because of what objection Paul anticipates in the succeeding verses.

Objection 2: That's Not Fair!

¹⁴ Are we saying, then, that God was unfair? Of course not! ¹⁵ For God said to Moses, "I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose." ¹⁶ So it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it. ¹⁷ For the Scriptures say that God told Pharaoh, "I have appointed you for the very purpose of displaying my power in you and to spread my fame throughout the earth." ¹⁸ So you see, God chooses to show mercy to some, and he chooses to harden the hearts of others so they refuse to listen. (Romans 9:14-18, NLT)

Paul anticipates that people will object to what he has just said, by saying, "That's not fair!" If Paul was saying (as some conclude) that God chooses to save people based on what choice He knows we will make, I don't think we would respond by saying that's not fair. We don't have issue with that explanation—it seems eminently reasonable to us. But when we say that God chose to save certain people, not based on their choice, but on His own, independent and sovereign choice, we bristle, as we feel like that isn't fair. And that's why I think that's the right way to understand what Paul is saying. I believe Paul's teaching has been consistent, that left to our own devices, we will all reject Him. But God, for reasons known only to Him, intervenes in the lives of some and chooses to bring them to saving faith in Him.

Often, people object to this teaching because they say that if God chooses to save some, but not others, that makes Him a tyrant. That isn't true. Paul reminds us that God is not obligated to show mercy to anyone. Mercy is a gift God chooses to bestow, not

something He must extend to everyone. When we grasp this, our perspective changes. All any one of us is owed is condemnation. And yet, we know that God does choose to extend mercy! Every person who trusts in Christ receives forgiveness of their sin. Rather than criticizing the fact that God does not extend mercy to all, we should marvel at the fact that He extends mercy to *any*! And as believers, we should find ourselves in awe of the fact that He extends mercy to us!

Paul's answer to the objection that none of this is fair is essentially to say, you're correct! Fair is condemnation for all. But thank God, He has chosen to extend mercy—not to everyone, but to some. It is a glorious gift—but a gift that *must* be given is no gift at all. Those who do not receive the gift of forgiveness are not treated unfairly. Rather, God allows them to persist in their hard, sinful hearts—even going so far as to say that God hardens their hearts as well—which I believe means that God hardens them in the sinful resolve they already have. It might be accurate to say that we don't like this, or that it's different than how we think it should be—but it isn't accurate to say it isn't fair.

Objection 3: How Can God Blame Us?

This leads to the third objection.

¹⁹ Well then, you might say, "Why does God blame people for not responding? Haven't they simply done what he makes them do?" ²⁰ No, don't say that. Who are you, a mere human being, to argue with God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, "Why have you made me like this?"

²¹ When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn't he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into?

²² In the same way, even though God has the right to show his anger and his power, he is very patient with those on whom his anger falls, who are destined for destruction. ²³ He does this to make the riches of his glory shine even brighter on those to whom he shows mercy, who were prepared in advance for glory.

²⁴ And we are among those whom he selected, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles. (Romans 9:19-24, NLT)

The third objection Paul anticipates is to ask, if God planned all of this out before the creation of the world, then how can He hold us responsible? Aren't we simply doing what He's made us do? I don't think that's accurate. Paul has been very clear that we freely choose sin and rebellion. God doesn't make us sin. He does, however, draw some to a place of faith. But we still feel like somehow this isn't right.

Admittedly, Paul's answer to this objection isn't very satisfying...but it does make sense. In essence, Paul reminds us that we have no right to question God's motives and purposes. God's character is the standard against which we measure right and wrong, good and evil, and just and unjust. If God says something is good and right and we disagree, then our conception of good is wrong, not God's. To this end, Paul reminds us that God, as the creator, has every right to do whatever He wants with His creation.

Some say this makes God capricious, or that He doesn't care about people at all. That simply doesn't match with the rest of scripture. The scriptures tell us that He loves us

and that our salvation was motivated by His love for His creation. At the same time, Paul seems to indicate that the Lord may have an even greater purpose at work. That purpose is to make His own glory manifest in the lives of those He has chosen to save.

By God choosing to allow His just punishment to fall on some (which is what each of us deserves), those who are forgiven have a point of comparison. We can understand how great our salvation is as we see His just wrath poured out on others. And as we understand the magnitude of God's wrath, we also begin to understand the magnitude of His grace. This, it would seem, is God's greater purpose—that we might understand the fullness of who He is. By choosing to extend mercy to some, and allowing others to face the just punishment they deserve, His character is put on display most clearly. We see God's justice and wrath, while also seeing the riches of His love, mercy, and grace.

I think we struggle with this because we imagine that the entire universe is primarily concerned with us. But this reminds us that it's not. I once had a student ask me, doesn't this make God selfish? Isn't it wrong to make everything about us?

My response was simple. It is wrong for you or me to want to be the center of the universe, because we're not. But God actually is the center of the universe. So for Him to want to be the center isn't wrong, that's how it's supposed to be! When we grasp this, it causes us to reevaluate our place in this world and our standing before the Lord.

Gentiles Are Israel?

In the concluding section of this passage, Paul quotes several Old Testament prophecies to show us that this has been God's plan all along. His plan has always been to bring Gentiles into the fold of His chosen people. As you read the Old Testament with this in mind, you see it everywhere. God consistently talks about how He is going to use the nation of Israel to manifest His glory to all nations.

So, today we understand that "God's chosen people" is not only the physical nation of Israel—it is people from every tribe, tongue, and nation who demonstrate faith in Christ! As Gentiles, it is an astounding truth that by God's glorious grace, we, who were not part of God's family have now been adopted into it! What a wonderful truth it is!

Conclusion

Admittedly, this passage teaches some hard lessons. We struggle with the notion of a God who would choose to save some, but not others. What this passage teaches may challenge our preconceived notions of God and ourselves. But our approach must always be to submit ourselves to the teaching of scripture. If our understanding of who God is and the way He works differs from what the scriptures say, then our understanding is flawed—not the scriptures. While there are some difficult teachings in this passage, there are also some significant lessons we should learn as well.

First, salvation is by faith, not heritage. Many people believe they are good with God because of their heritage or membership in a certain group. Some believe that because they are Americans, or because their families are religious, or because they have a

pastor in their family, or even because they belong to a church, that their forgiveness is assured. Paul reminds us in these verses that it is possible to be part of a group that enjoys God's blessing, but to not be one of God's children. The Jewish people of Paul's day were the quintessential example, but they are not the only ones. Make sure today that you know where your faith is placed. Trust in Christ's sacrifice for you, as He alone can assure your salvation.

Second, we should have a heart for lost people. Paul's heart broke for his Jewish brothers and sisters, even though many of them had tried to kill him! Paul said he would be willing to give up his own salvation and status before God if it would result in the salvation of his Jewish brothers and sisters. The reason Paul felt this way was because he knew what was at stake. Often, we have believed the lie of our culture that it doesn't matter what people believe, or that religious beliefs are personal things that we don't discuss. But if we understand the gospel message, we also understand what is at stake! People who do not trust in Christ will spend eternity separated from Him in Hell. What cost are you willing to endure to help those around you come to know Jesus? Paul was willing to be forever cut off from God. Often, we aren't even willing to be inconvenienced. We, who have received this great gift, should have a heart for those who have not yet believed. We do not know who will respond in faith, so we should do whatever we can to share the truth with those around us, so they at least know the offer of forgiveness available to them, in the hopes that they may embrace the gospel as we have.

Third, God's glory is the most important thing. It is so easy for us to read the Bible as being primarily about us. In a sense, it is. God's love for us is displayed throughout the pages of scripture, but humanity is not the main character of the Bible or of history. All of scripture, all of creation, all of history, is intended to reveal to us the character of God and to bring Him glory. When we begin to grasp this, when we begin to see that our primary purpose in life is to honor Him in the way He deserves, then it changes the way we view everything else. We must have a right understanding of God, because until we do, we cannot have a right understanding of ourselves or our world.

Finally, God has a purpose and a plan. One of the things that is difficult in this passage is that we don't understand how or why God makes the decisions He does. Just because we don't understand His reasons, however, doesn't mean there aren't reasons. We want to understand everything. But the reality is, we can't fully understand God's thoughts. What we can understand is that He is good, and He is in control. If we grasp these truths, we find peace that does not depend on our circumstances. The fact that we don't understand all of God's ways shouldn't lead to despair, but to worship, because it reminds us how much higher, wiser, and more powerful He is than we are. So we should trust Him when we can't see and when we don't understand. That, I believe, is Paul's purpose in these verses—to elevate the character of God, so that He may be praised. And that's my hope for you as well.

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