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Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith
Message: Who's to Blame?

Transcribed Message
October 31, 2021
Romans 9:19-21

CS Lewis, as you know, was a prolific writer, author and apologist. He was an atheist until later in his 20s when he came to Christ. His first work in the area of apologetics was published in 1940. It was called *The Problem of Pain* and he stepped into one of the most difficult problems that we face – that of human suffering and pain that is so very difficult so often to figure out what is happening. After his death, a series of essays that he had written and letters was published under the title *God in the Dock*. That's a British expression for someone who is in the witness stand. The dock in British language is a reference to the witness stand. It is as if the picture is being painted for us that we have God in the dock. There are a lot of questions that we would want to submit to God. There are perplexing things that we experience in life and just looking at the world that we live in. there are many questions that people might envision asking God if He in fact were in the dock, in the witness stand and we were in a position to ask Him questions.

The ones that Paul raises in Romans 9 would probably be on our short list of questions to ask God. This morning Paul answers one of those questions for us again. I think the answer that he gives us is both challenging and it's surprising. Let's look this morning back in Romans 9 verses 19 to 21. Here we are. Back again and we want to see this morning the sovereignty of God speaks from nearly every page of the Bible. It reminds us that God is God and we are not. Now the only downside to this morning is there are no community groups after our worship time because we're going to go right into a set up shortly after. So all of the questions that get raised will not be answered this morning by your community group leader, who I know week to week has been doing that for you. you'll have to carry these over to the next week or so.

Let's look at God in the dock. God in the dock. We begin by asking the question how did we get here? How did we get to this place? Especially if you haven't been here,

we remind you by way of review that the Biblical context of this 9th chapter is that God has a chosen people. That's one thing that all of us can agree on. We all agree that Israel is God's chosen people. God chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all the way down through that line they are God's chosen people. God selected them. God chose them. God elected them. Those aren't my words. Those are the words of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 7 verse 6 where he says: I have chosen you. I have selected you, Israel. Out of all the peoples of the earth. Out of all the nations I have elected you to be my chosen people. Yet in Paul's day and on into our day, it is very obvious that there are not a lot of Jews who are believing and responding to this gospel. That has raised this issue and this question about the faithfulness of God. that's what Paul is stepping in to here: What, God, is Your plan for Your people? Are You still carrying it out? Are You still doing what You promised that You would do?

When Paul does that back in this 9th chapter, he then secondly steps into this theological struggle. He steps into this theological issue about God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Divine election and human responsibility, of God's sovereignty and what is so often referred to as free will. That's kind of what surfaces here but it reminds me of a quote from Charles Spurgeon who when asked about these two seemingly competing ideas – divine election and human responsibility, God's sovereignty and the free choice of man – and how he put these competing ideas together. Spurgeon said that he didn't. He never felt it was necessary to reconcile friends. He's basically saying to us in that response that he sees that these things are both true. They don't have to be at odds with each other. Is there a necessary tension? Yes, there is. Are they against each other? I don't think they are. The Bible says in Ephesians 1 that we have been chosen before the foundation of the world. We have been chosen, selected before the foundation of the world. I have said before, and I'm going to say again this morning, and I'll probably say it again. Because this 9th chapter is still going on. No one is in heaven because they're elect. Election speaks about the process of salvation. It is not the means of. The means of. The means of salvation. People experience eternal life because they believe the gospel. That's the tension of divine election and human responsibility, of divine sovereignty and the free moral agency of men and women. That is always a part of this discussion.

Remember Paul is the greatest teacher of divine election of anybody that we have in the New Testament. You put that with the fact that Paul is the greatest evangelist of the 1st century. In the mind of Paul, I think he would have said the same thing Spurgeon said. I don't have to reconcile them because they're friends. There is a way in the mind of God that these work together.

When Paul said what he did back in verse 11, though they were not yet born, talking about Jacob and Esau and they hadn't done anything good or bad. God made a choice before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad. Then when he said in verse 13 Jacob have I loved and Esau I hated. Then we had that first question that came up. That first question was this sounds really unfair, God. God, this sounds a lot like maybe You're being unjust. You're telling us You have made a selection before Jacob and Esau were even born, before they had done anything either good or bad. That idea behind that question – Is God unjust? Is God unfair? – that question is being raised because these 1st century readers understood exactly what Paul was saying. He was saying that God makes a selection and a choice in eternity past before we've done anything good or bad. That's the exact text of Scripture. From that idea naturally comes to our human understanding, God, I have a question. That sounds very unfair. That sounds very unjust.

They would not ask that question if the foreknowledge of God meant simply that God looks down through time, sees who is going to believe, and picks them. That by definition is fair. What is not fair to the human understanding is God telling us that He makes a choice in eternity past. The very question that they're asking reveals that they are understanding clearly what it is that Paul is teaching. The reason Paul can write this in the way that he does is he's had these questions come to him every time he teaches this. So, he sends it this way to the Romans. The difficult answer you remember was, whether it pertains to Jacob, or whether it pertains to Esau, or whether it pertains to Pharaoh, the difficult answer that Paul gives back to that question is God unjust is God unfair is simply to say *me genoita*. May it never be. By definition, God is righteous. By definition, God is holy. By definition, God cannot do anything unjust. By definition, God cannot do anything unfair. The very fact that this question is being raised, Paul doesn't answer it directly other than to say look at who you are talking about. You're talking

about a God who has eternally defined Himself as being righteous and just and holy. He could never do anything that would be unjust. That's the struggle that we're dealing with in Romans 9.

But we're not done. We're not done. I think as we're going along that there is a progression of difficulty that I'm sensing here. So, we come to an even more difficult question perhaps this morning. Let's look at another question. We're going to go in verses 19 to 21. As you look at verse 19, I want to suggest to you that this is no ordinary question. This is no ordinary question. This again is stepping into this area of divine election. Does divine election destroy human responsibility? That is this question this morning. Look at verse 19: "You will say to me then, why does He still find fault? For who can resist His will." Paul has been teaching on the sovereign grace of God. He's been teaching about this matter of God's electing purposes. Paul did this everywhere he went. As he taught the doctrines of salvation of the grace of God by faith alone through Christ alone, he taught these truths everywhere he went. Everywhere he went, when he taught these truths hands were going up and they were saying Paul, I have a question. Is God unfair in this process? Is God unjust? That's what it sounds like to me. Remember Paul said *me genoita*. It can't be. He's not unjust. He is not unfair. Paul, it sounds like what you're saying is that if God is sovereign, then He simply eliminated human responsibility. That is the question that is before us here. Every time Paul would teach this, he heard these questions. And so here it is. These are our questions too. We're all excited, aren't we? We're excited about the prospect of Paul answering our question this morning because we have the same one.

But I say again to you just as I did back in verse 14 and now again at verse 19, if our salvation depended on us, this question wouldn't be being asked. These questions, my friends, are being raised because these listeners and readers, just like us when we hear them, when we read them, these are the questions that naturally come to our mind. Here is yet another example of that. If salvation depends on me, there is nothing unfair about whether God chooses me or not. It is all on me. If salvation is on me, then it isn't a matter of my human responsibility being violated because it's all up to me. That's why he's dealing with this. If I decide based on my free will to move towards God, verse

19 is irrelevant. It wouldn't be being asked. But if in fact we are understanding Paul as we think we are, then these are questions that we have.

Let me speak to verse 19 and this question of does the sovereign will of God violate human responsibility to the point that we're no longer possible to be held responsible. I would say back to you first of all that is partly true. Part of that equation is true but listen clearly as to which part it is. Yes, it is true that no one can resist the will of God. What God wants He is going to get. That's what the psalmist says in Psalm 115 verse 3: "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." That's why He's God. There is a part of this statement that is true. What God wants He gets. His will cannot be resisted.

Back in Romans 8, Paul talked about this matter of predestination and God designing a destiny for us ahead of time, and he said those whom God has predestined He's called. Those whom He has called He's justified. Those whom He has justified He's glorified. Remember we talked about how that chain cannot be broken. God has committed Himself to this work. No one is going to resist His will. That doesn't mean – hear this carefully – that a whole bunch of people are getting saved and all the while they're getting saved they're saying no, I don't want to be saved. I don't want to be saved. Please no. Not me. That's not what this is teaching. That's not what this means. It's not as if people don't want to get saved but God's will can't be resisted and they have to be saved even though they don't want to. Our own story I believe validates this. Especially those of you that were saved later in life. If you were saved at four, five, six, or seven you may not remember at all what was happening in the process of coming to grips with the gospel. But many of you that were saved later in life you would stand right now and in sharing your testimony you would say very likely there was a time in your life where you are resisting anything spiritual. You could not dream of the fact that one day you would be sitting at Covenant Community Church singing songs of worship and praise to God and listening to the Word of God being taught. That was not in your area of interest. That would be true of many of you.

What happened? The one who chose you began to work in your life. His will ultimately was irresistible. Ultimately, He broke down those barriers and He brought you to Himself. You willingly, fully of your own volition, embraced the gospel and believed. In

that sense, this statement is certainly true that God is God and He gets what He wants. His will is accomplished. We see it in the way that we pray. Some of you are praying for family members who don't yet know Christ. You're praying for friends and coworkers and neighbors. Why are you praying for them if of their own volition and will they're just going to one day choose and respond to the gospel? Because you know fundamentally that's not the way it works. Fundamentally you know that God has got to stir their heart, that God has got to open their eyes, that God has got to give them understanding of the gospel, that the god of this world is blinding them and so you're appealing to the God of heaven to open their eyes to the gospel. What is that? That is an understanding of the sovereignty of God and you're appealing to the God who is in the heavens and does as He pleases to please open the eyes of this person that I love and care about deeply. So, I say to you that our own experience validates what Paul says here.

But it is also to be understood that this is partly false. The objector says if God is sovereign, then there's no human responsibility. God can't hold me responsible because He's already said whoever He has mercy on He has mercy on, whoever He hardens He hardens and therefore I get off the hook. There's no accountability. There's no responsibility. There can't be a day of judgment because you've just affirmed to me that God is in the heavens and He does whatever He pleases. That's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that there is responsibility. The Bible teaches that there is accountability. The Bible teaches that it is appointed unto men once to die and then comes the judgment. There is human responsibility.

And you say, I can't understand that. Please explain it better. And I say, I can't. I can't explain it better. It's a part of the divine mystery. It is what we step into when we step into the reality that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign and that there is human responsibility. Just to give you a picture what that looks like. Isaiah 14 and verse 24: "The Lord of hosts has sworn: 'As I have planned, so it shall be, and as I have purposed, so it shall stand, that I will break the Assyrian in my land, and on my mountains trample him underfoot; and his yoke shall depart from them, and his burden from their shoulder.' This is the purpose that is purposed concerning the whole earth." It is a statement in which God says the Assyrians are all over My people. They wish to do them harm and I'm announcing and telling you that I am the God of heaven. I will do as I

please. They will not have their way with My people, and they will be held accountable and responsible for their actions against My people. But I have planned it. I have purposed it, and I will do it. Yes, they will also be held accountable. The question is raised: God, how can there be human accountability and responsibility if You are doing all of this work? You have mercy on whom You have mercy. You harden whom You harden.

Now look at this answer. I say to you that this is no ordinary answer. We may need to brace our hearts for what Paul says next in verse 20: "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" Now the first thing I want you to see here is the focus is not on the theological tension. when Paul raises this question we're like good! Again! We're ready. God is in the dock. I've got on my prosecutorial robes and I'm ready to step towards the witness stand. God, I've got some questions for you. this seems very unjust. this seems very unfair. I don't know how you can hold these people accountable and responsible what you've already declared that You are sovereign and Your will cannot be resisted. God, I'd like to ask you some questions. That's what we think might play out. That's not what plays out. Paul does not step into this theological tension. God, how can You blame Pharaoh when You said that You hardened his heart against You? God, how can You blame Esau when You said that You've chosen Jacob and You've rejected him? God, how can You blame anyone who doesn't believe? Paul doesn't step in to the theological tension to answer those questions.

What he does is Paul basically says, my words to his words, I will have none of this. I will have none of this. Look at this answer. The focus is not on the theological tension. The focus is on the audacious irreverence of the questioner. There is a lot that we could say here but I want to just lift up two things. The first thing is this. This is a rebuke. Don't miss this. This is a rebuke to our hearts. This is a rebuke to anybody that thinks they're going to put God in the dock and they're going to set Him straight. They think they're going to press their prosecutorial questions upon Him and He better answer lest He be a witness found in contempt of court. No, Paul says, woah! Wait just a minute. Take off that robe and go ahead and sit back down. He basically says you have crossed the line. You've crossed the line.

In the Greek text it is even clearer than it is in our English text, but it's clear enough in our English text. In the Greek text, the very first words of that 20th verse is "O man". It's in the emphatic position and Paul starts off and says "O man". And he ends it with "to God". O man, who are you? these strongly contrasting words. To paraphrase it, it is simply to say who do you think you are. There's a podcast going on. I've mentioned it in different settings called "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill". It's a podcast of the events that happened to a mega church in Seattle that basically closed its doors in 2015 after having grown to 15,000 people and God did amazing things. The city of Seattle was touched by the gospel and by this church, but through a whole series of events and a very toxic environment the church literally just closed. 2015. Mark Driscoll, who was the teaching pastor, in one Sunday morning sermon was challenging the men of his church and he yelled, probably at the top of his lungs it sounds like, he yelled to his men, "Who do you think you are?" That little clip went viral and it's a part of every one of the episodes as the intro to the story that they're telling that time, and when I read this, those words which I've heard many times in that podcast just popped into my head. Who do you think you are to ask this question of God?

There are corollaries in parenting. I could ask for a show of hands, either as a child growing up, a teenager, or a parent that has heard at some point in the parenting cycle, "Young man, who do you think you are talking to me that way?" That is something that we probably all have said or heard and it speaks to this very thing. This is a rebuke. This is Paul saying stop where you are. Consider the questioner.

Having said that, I would hasten to say this is not God's heart towards us when we come with a humble inquiry. We don't want to miss the context here and do injustice to the text. This is not the way God responds to a searcher for truth. This is not the way God responds to us when we're struggling with something and we're pressing in and calling out to Him for help. This is an arrogant, indignant protest against God. That's what this is.

Notice in that 20th verse: "But who are you, O man, to answer back to..." He doesn't say Paul. It isn't the teacher that is in the scope here. It's God. Paul has it right. We know that this is an arrogant, indignant questioner because the statement there in that 20th verse – "Who are you, O man, to answer back. That little phrase "answer back"

means to contend. It means to argue. It is what happens when children talk back to their parents. They're contending. They're answering back. Listen. It's not a humble question of how can these things be, God. It is God, these things ought not to be. that's the person speaking this to God. this is an intrusion on the part of the creature to make his way into the council of the creator. It is saying I want a seat at the table. I'm owed that. Really? This is a total and complete mismatch.

So we don't miss it, Paul makes it abundantly clear thirdly in the illustration. Look at this illustration. Paul zeros in on two things to make his point abundantly clear. Who are you to question God's role in what it is that He's doing? He uses a very common metaphor. "Will what is molded say to its molder why have you made me like this?" We have this common Biblical metaphor of the potter, and the Potter sitting at the wheel of the making of an item of pottery. That is what is pictured here. It's Paul appealing again to the Old Testament Scriptures. It wouldn't have taken anything for the readers of the 1st century to immediately visualize this every time they went to town. At the city square there would have been pottery makers making pottery. We can visualize it because we see it enough. But for them it was just like every-day life. That's what he draws on.

The Old Testament is filled with statements. Let me just read one of them from Isaiah 29 and verse 16: "You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, 'He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'." That is just one example at Isaiah 29:16. You can go to Isaiah 45:9 or Isaiah 64:8. You can go to Jeremiah 18:1. Jeremiah really unfolds this picture in its fullness by having this interaction. Is the lump of clay really going to be talking to the potter about what it wants to be? Paul's point is forcefully made. It's an absurdity. Not going to happen. Not going to take place. you and I have as much chance of comprehending the mind of God with regards to His purposes and plans as a piece of clay has to step into the mind of the potter. That's the picture that Paul gives. Be satisfied. Be satisfied, my friends, to know that God is righteous. Be satisfied to know that God is holy. Be satisfied to know that God is just. Be satisfied to know that God is compassionate. Be satisfied to know that God is merciful. Remind yourself often of Deuteronomy 29:29 – "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the

words of this law.” It is Romans 11:33 – “O, the depth both of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out.” Who are you and I to question the role of the potter in our lives?

Paul doesn't stop. He says secondly who are you to question God's rights? Verse 21. “Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable?” Look at the word in verse 21 – Has the Potter no right. It's the word *exousia*. It's the word authority. He cannot do this? He doesn't have the right to make that choice? When we think of the sovereignty of God, we can think of it in three different ways. We can think of it as the sovereignty of God as it relates to activity. As it relates to activity, it has to do with the fact that He chooses to do whatever it is that He wants to do. We can think of the sovereignty of God as it relates to His ability. He has the power to do it. We can think of the sovereignty of God as it relates to authority. He has the right to do it. That is the focus here.

God's desire on the one hand is to make a Ming vase. If God has the right to make a Ming vase, He has that right. If He wants to make a washbasin so that we can wash each other's feet (see John 13), then He has every right to make that other piece of clay a washbasin. That's what Paul is talking about here. One for honor; one for dishonor. It is the posture of the creature to be humbled before the Creator. Remember, we've referenced this before. In Job 40, Job finally gets to the point when he realizes who God is that he says I just put my hand over my mouth and I am quiet.

There is an important distinction that we should make in verse 21. You notice again: “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?” That little statement there – the same lump – is very important. I want you to hear that this is not saying to us that God has made people to be sinners. This is not a picture of Creator God. This is a picture of God as the moral governor of the universe. The lump of clay exists. I think it's a cross reference to what he said back in verse 10 about the fact that Jacob and Esau have the same father. They have one father.

There is the same lump of clay, and what is that lump of clay? That lump of clay is a picture of the sinful humanity. Here's a lump of clay. It represents the sinfulness of humanity. From that lump of clay, God says He will make one for honor and one for

dishonor. God is not responsible for our sinfulness. God created Adam perfect. He put him in the garden in a perfect place. Everything that you could ever imagine was perfect and Adam chose to sin. God did not create Adam as a sinful being. He created him as a morally perfect being. Adam chose to sin. And we chose to sin in Adam. That was Romans 5. You say – I don't like that. And I would say back to you: Really? You would've done better than Adam? You would have done better than Eve? I don't think so. If we do want to argue, then God will take that up with us in Romans 5. Being the perfect righteous God that He is, that was the most just and righteous thing He could have done. We're all the same lump of clay. That is the point that I'm making things.

James 1:13 says, "Let no one say when you are tempted they are tempted of God. God cannot be tempted with evil neither tempteth He any man." That is so very important. Mercy is neither a human right nor is it a divine obligation. God extends mercy to unbelieving sinners as He wills. John Stott put it this way: "If therefore God hardens some, He is not being unjust for that is what their sin deserves. If on the other hand, He has chosen or He has compassion on some, He is not being unjust for He is dealing with them in mercy. The wonder is not some are saved and others not, but that anybody is saved at all, for we deserve nothing at God's hand but judgment. If we receive what we deserve, which is judgment, or if we receive what we do not deserve, which is mercy, in neither case is God unjust. If therefore anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved the credit is God's. This antinomy," he says (antinomy is an apparent contradiction. It's not a contradiction; it looks to be a contradiction), "contains a mystery which our present knowledge cannot solve but is consistent with Scripture, history, and our experience."

My friends, what do we take away from these challenging verses? Let's go back to where we started and let's reflect on this. God is God and we are not. We really would do well just to think on that for a moment. God is God and we are not. Submit our questions as they are with that in mind. I believe that that statement can be one of the most comforting thoughts that we can think, to acknowledge and bow before our Creator. Let's let the Word of God, let's let the Bible shape our vision of God, our understanding of God. Let's submit to that vision and revelation that God has given up Himself and then let's worship Him together.

My friend, if you are here this morning or if you're listening by livestream, we say again to you as we say every Sunday, if you want to know with absolute certainty your eternal destiny, if you want to know right at this moment of time that you're going to spend eternity in heaven with God forever and ever, the good news is that the Bible wants you to have that certainty. God wants you to know for sure these things. The Scripture says these things are written so that you might know that you have eternal life. How is it that we know beyond a doubt that we have eternal life? It is by believing and trusting and putting our faith in the gospel of the grace of God. It is simply my acknowledging that I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It is simply to say that there is nothing that I can do to earn salvation, nothing that I can do to add to the salvation that God has provided. If that's where I am, then all I need to do is believe that what Jesus did on the cross as the Son of God was for me to provide forgiveness of my sins. God says at the moment that I embrace that truth, the moment that I believe that truth, a divine transaction takes place and your destiny is changed forever. You will live forever in the presence of God. My friends, there is no greater news. There is no better news. There is no news that we need to hear more clearly than that news. We call on you this morning to trust Jesus as your Savior. In the quietness of these moments to say yes to God. I have sinned. I have fallen short of your glory. I believe that what Jesus did He did for me.

Let's pray. Father God, thank You again for Your unchanging Word. Father, as hard as these truths are, we run to Your revelation of Yourself and of who we are. There we see that You have provided a way – a way for us to live with You forever, a way for us to have our sins forgiven, a way for us to know with absolute certainty this morning that we can spend eternity with You. Father, we call out to You and we ask that You would open the hearts of many to this glorious gospel even this morning, for we pray this in Jesus's name, Amen.