

Romans 9:1-29 "The Mystery of God's Sovereignty", 11/1/20

Prayer:

Lord, we pray for our nation as we approach Tuesday's election. I pray that you would grant us, as citizens of Christ's kingdom first and citizens of America second, wisdom and discernment with the privilege and solemn responsibility of electing our political leaders. May our decisions be guided by prayer, the counsel of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. In your mercy, would you provide safety at the polls and grant our communities peace with the results, whatever they may be. We pray now that whomever would be elected to lead our nation. I pray they would lead with integrity, humility, clarity and discernment from you, Lord. You know our anxious hearts as we approach this election. We thank you for your sovereignty over elected officials, presidents and nations. We pray according to Psalm 146 that we would not put our ultimate trust in any political leader for they cannot save nor fulfill our deepest hopes and dreams for our nation. But we would firmly fix our hope on you, Lord. May our longings for a more perfect union find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. Father, uphold and preserve our unity in the Spirit within our church family. Help us to love one another as Christ has loved us.

Now as we turn our hearts and minds to your Word, I pray that I would teach it with clarity, compassion and conviction. Help us to better understand your providential will and ways in history and our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Well we've spent time basking in one of the most heart-filled and encouraging chapters in the Bible, Romans 8, and now we are transitioning into one of the most head-filled, complex sections of Scripture about **God's Providence, Romans 9-11**. In this section Paul is going to address one of the biggest theological conundrums and a question I get asked as a pastor all the time in lots of different ways...no not, will my pet be in heaven? (Dogs yes, cats no). The conundrum of God's sovereignty and man's free will. Does God choose those who will be saved or does man make the choice? I'm sure you have wrestled with these questions and for good reason. Now people want to know where I land on this debate- do I lean more on the God's sovereignty side of the equation, often called Calvinism? Or more on the man's free will side- often called Arminianism? And let me tell you, I take that as a compliment because I believe that means I'm preaching the Bible, not just a theological system, because the Bible maintains a tension between these two, and so, when I am dealing with a text of Scripture that emphasizes God's sovereignty, I ought to sound more like a Calvinist. But when I am preaching those parts that emphasize our free will to choose I ought to sound more Arminian. And I'm perfectly ok if that creates an unresolved tension in my preaching. Listen, I know Scripture and God never contradict themselves, but that doesn't mean you and I have the capacity to resolve it with our very limited insight and perspective compared to the Almighty.

Now chapter 9 is one of those chapters that's going to emphasize the sovereignty of God. It is no accident that Paul includes this discussion about God's sovereignty immediately after his triumphal declarations in chapter 8 about God's unwavering commitment to fulfill his promises and purposes in our lives. **Remember 8:30 "Those he foreknew, those he predestined..."?**

Now someone as they are reading this may have an objection that would go something like this, “Paul, you say that when God calls someone he always brings them all the way home. But what about the Jews? If God promised that Israel would be his people, yet the majority did not believe in Christ, does that mean God’s promise is failing? And if so, what if that happens to us?” And so Paul is going to take three chapters, 9-11, to answer this question and in doing so we are going to learn about God past, present and future plans for the Jewish people and us.

Now before Paul begins to address this theological conundrum of God’s sovereignty, he shows us that this is not an ivory tower discussion for him. It is deeply personal. *v.1-3 I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit—² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race.*

Paul felt the pain of knowing that his own people have rejected their Savior, he says, I would take the bullet for Israel if it means they could all be saved. And instead of seeking to ignore this hard reality or alter his doctrine to negate it, he instead lived with the unwavering truth of this difficult tension. We all face the same dilemmas with those we love who don’t know Christ, who have walked away to pursue their own will or desires- maybe a son or daughter, a parent a friend or neighbor. And some Christians today, out of their own pain, seek to alter truth, make concessions to be more inclusive, well maybe God didn’t really mean this when he said it. Paul didn’t do that, he lived with the tension and said, “It pains me, but I’m going to stand on God’s Word, with both compassion and conviction in the things I don’t fully understand.”

Now Paul is going to address Three questions about **God’s Mysterious Sovereignty** played out in the history of Israel.

Question #1 Has God failed to keep his promises? (v.3-13)

Why have most of the Jewish people historically rejected Jesus? Whose fault is that? Paul wants to rule out one answer- right away. *v.6a It is not as though God’s word had failed.* We can’t blame God or His promised word, why? Because they should have been expecting the Messiah. In *v.4-5 (displayed not read)* Paul lists all the blessings of Israel that should have led them to see Jesus. In the devo on Facebook tomorrow I’m going to go into detail as to why that is, but suffice to say- the vast majority of Israel, especially its leadership, rejected the Messiah.

In addition, Paul tells us that God has kept His promise because: *6b For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.* From the beginning, being a true Jew was a matter of the heart and not something merely of the flesh. That means even in the Old Testament there was a distinction between Jews who were so only by heritage and those who embraced faith at a heart-level. To prove his point, he turns to *two Old Testament examples in v.7-13.*

God said that Abraham’s descendants would be blessed, but Abraham had two sons Isaac and Ishmael. But Isaac was the one through whom God made his covenant, not Ishmael. Ishmael may have been one of Abraham’s physical descendants but not his spiritual descendants. Paul

continues to say of the twin sons of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, ¹⁰ *Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac.* ¹¹ *Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand:* ¹² *not by works but by him who calls.* Even though they were both physical descendants only Jacob was the spiritual descendent and inherited the promises. The point is that God is faithful to his true children, those who are spiritual descendants, not merely physical descendants.

He also makes a second point here by showing us that God's choosing of Jacob over Esau was not because *of anything good or bad that they did.* Does this mean that God is arbitrary? Does God choose people in a sense by saying "eeny, meeny, miney, moe? No Paul is not saying that God has no reasons, all we are told is that the reasons are not in us.¹ This leads us to a second, even thornier question:

Question #2 Is God unfair in how he dispenses mercy? (v.9-18)

If God chose Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau...then how is that fair? To answer that question Paul moves on from looking at the faith of the patriarchs to focus on the time of the exodus, the time of Moses and Pharaoh. And his central argument is God's right to say v.15 *I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and compassion on whom I show compassion.* This is a direct quote from Exodus chapter 33. In chapter 32, the people rebel against God by building the golden calf and worshipping it instead of God. What they deserved was for God to wipe them out, or at least to reject them. He judged a portion of them, but he extended compassion and mercy upon the majority of them and did not reject them. Chapter 33 God says even though these are a stiff-necked and rebellious people- I am a God of mercy and compassion. But you may say, that isn't fair that some get mercy and others don't. But to say that mercy is unfair is to say that it is owed to all people... *but mercy is a gift, not an obligation.*

Gift card under pew...was that fair? Be skeptical of anyone that would try to convince you that the highest good is fairness and equity. It's good, but mercy and grace are far greater and thank God that's true. *John Stott- "the basis on which God deals savingly with sinners is not justice but mercy."* God isn't fair. It wasn't fair that Jesus should have to die on a cross. That wasn't fair. He didn't deserve that. We did- it would have been fair for us to get judgment for our sin. What is equitable would have been for all of us to be lost forever. Thank God he's not fair and equitable when it comes to salvation.

Question #3 How can we be accountable if God is the one choosing? (v.19-30)

Maybe you've asked the question- if God knows everything and he's the one doing the choosing and He's sovereign- then isn't this just all predetermined? Is God just some puppet master and is choice an illusion? If so how can He blame me for my actions? If you have asked this question- you are in good company because Paul asks it as well. Paul answers this question in three parts.

Response #1 Who are you to ask?

¹ Tim Keller, *Romans For You*

¹⁹ One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?” ²⁰ But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?

This is like what the kids say these days, “Slow your role.” Now this might sound condescending and dismissive to you...unless you have raised children. How many times has your toddler or preschooler questioned some of your decisions like having to get their shots at the doctor or putting restrictions on their screen time, and you know that even attempting to get into a full explanation would be an exercise in futility because their little, under-developed brains can’t possibly understand all your reasons. Ok, multiply that times a billion...Do you think you are smarter than God? Do we really think our underdeveloped brains can begin to comprehend the wisdom and will of God?

Response #2 God has Glorious (and Mysterious) Purposes

²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory.

The ultimate end that God pursues in all things, including our salvation, is his glory. Honestly, that’s hard to reconcile at times. We’re used to thinking of ourselves and our interests as the most important element in the universe...we aren’t. Go outside at night and look up: the whole creation is designed to declare to you, “You’re not the point, God is!” The exaltation of His glory is the greatest good in the universe. And that might offend us in a culture who grew up thinking we’re the point of it all, we are such special and unique snowflakes that it must be about us, but it’s not.

Let me illustrate it this way. **Astronomists (Picture)** say it is a good thing for us that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the solar system. If the earth were at the center, it would never have the gravitational ability to hold the rest of the solar system in orbit and we’d all die. But the sun does have that ability and so we live. So, if the sun were a person, the most loving thing the sun could do would be to keep itself at the center. And so it is with us and God. Having Him at the center, recognized for His worth, telling us to build our lives around Him, even when we don’t understand it, is the most loving thing He can do for us.²

Response #3 Humanity is to blame for sin, God is to be thanked for Salvation.

²² What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction?

This is a clear reference back to chapter 1 of Romans. ¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

² Thanks to J.D. Greear for this illustration.

No one can claim that God is unfair to judge, because we all sin. We all suppress truth, we reject God, we claim our own rights, desires, will as more important than God. In fact, Paul says, God relenting in destroying all of humanity is because of His patience.

John Stott: "If anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God's. This antinomy contains a mystery which our present knowledge cannot solve; but it is consistent with Scripture, history and experience."

Response #3 Slide "Here are five people who are planning to hold up a bank. They are friends of mine. I find out about it and I plead with them. I begged them not to do it. Finally they pushed me out of the way and they start out. I tackle one of the men and wrestle him to the ground. The others go ahead, rob the bank, a guard is killed, they are captured, convicted, sentenced... the one man who is not involved in the robbery goes free. Now I ask you this question whose fault was it that the other men were sentenced to jail? Now this other man who is walking around free can he say because my heart is so good I am a free man? The only reason he's free is because of me, because I restrained him."³ Can anyone say, God's not fair by giving me what I deserve, life apart from God in Hell? No. Can anyone of us say our salvation is our doing? Because we are just so good and worthy and righteous? No. Scripture's testimony is that you and I are worthy--genuinely worthy--to be condemned forever. Do you believe that? If so, you will have less trouble with this truth. **J. Oswald Sanders- "What will amaze us as we look backwards from eternity is not the severity of God's justice but the greatness of his mercy."**

Now, you might fold your arms and say, well, maybe God's plan doesn't include me. Maybe perhaps I'm not elected to be saved. I'll respond to that and say, why don't you choose him right now, and you'll discover God already chose you. You'll discover God has already been pursuing you, just that you are alive, in church, hearing this message is proof enough. You say, well, maybe God didn't choose me. Actually, I can prove that God did choose you. Receive him today. Receive him right now in your heart. And you'll discover God has known you and had his love fixed upon you before the foundation of the world. All who come to Him he receives! So much more to be said, but we have several more weeks in these chapters to discuss that.

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³ D. James Kennedy Illustration