

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN WORLD MISSION

Romans 9:1-33

Key Verse: 9:16

It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

In chapter 8, Paul describes the great privileges and blessings that our loving God has granted to those who are justified by faith in Christ. But then the question arises, "What about Israel?" God chose Israel in the Old Testament and made them many great promises. Is God done with Israel? Is God now abandoning Israel and his covenant with them because of their stubborn refusal to the gospel? If God is not faithful in keeping his promise to Israel, how can we trust him that he will keep his promises to us? In today's passage, Paul answers these questions by showing that God is sovereign and he has every right to deal as he pleases with Israel. God's words and his promises have not failed because God has always worked through a remnant according to His sovereign choice.

The concept of God's sovereign election or choice is not easy to fully grasp. But it is even more difficult to accept it and submit joyfully to it. Many people are troubled by this and even protest by saying: "*It's not fair for God to choose some and not others.*" "*It's not fair!*" We hear this a lot from children. But spiritually speaking, we are also doing the same frequently. Like little children, we tend to take so many things that we have received from God for granted. We often grumble and complain when others seem to have something we don't have such as better intelligence, abilities, physical appearances, jobs, and spiritual accomplishments. We protest and scream, "God, It's not fair!" However, as we study this passage, we learn that God has been more than fair to us. Instead of giving us what we deserve, God has showed us his mercy and granted us great privilege to be his people despite our sins and shortcomings. So let us rejoice and thank God for electing us in his great mercy as we meditate on this passage.

I. PAUL'S ANGUISH OVER ISRAEL (1-5)

Look at verses 1-3. Many experts advise parents that they need to say "I love you" while disciplining their children. This helps children to understand that the discipline does not come from anger or frustration but from love. Here we can see that Paul is doing the same thing to his own people, Israel. Before speaking tough and painful truth about Israel, Paul wanted his own people to know that he was not sharing this truth out of anger or vengeance. He was sharing this truth because he love them dearly.

Humanly speaking, it wasn't easy for Paul to love the Israelites. Do you know that one time forty Jewish men even took an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul? (Acts 23:12) That's how much his own people hated him. They constantly persecuted him and hindered his mission work but Paul didn't hate or try to retaliate. Paul could have said, "Let those proud and stubborn people go to hell! They totally deserve it!" Paul, instead, had "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" in his heart. (2) How much did Paul love them? Look at verse 3 again. *"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."* Wow! You sometime hear about people donating their kidneys to total strangers, which is a noble sacrifice. But giving up your own salvation for those who hate you! Honestly, I am just not there yet. I pray that my love of Jesus may grow deep until I can show my love even to those who mistreat and persecute me.

Look at verses 4-5. Israel was special because they were the only nation among many that had the privilege of being God's people. God dwelt with them and showed them his glory in the desert. They also received special revelation and promises such as the covenants, the law and the temple worship. He gave them great men of faith such as Abraham and David as ancestors. But the greatest gift of all was the Christ. They had all these wonderful blessings and opportunities, but what did they do with them. John 1:11

says the following: *“He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”* They enjoyed all the privileges and blessings of being God's people, but they rejected Christ. So they lost everything. We must not take our Christian heritage for granted and miss the point--which is knowing and serving Jesus himself, who is God over all.

So it certainly did not look like Israel was receiving the blessing that God had promised. Does this mean that God failed to keep his promises? Is God unfaithful to his words? Then how can we be sure of all promises given to us in Chapter 8?

II. GOD’S WORDS CANNOT FAIL (6-13)

Let’s read verse 6 together. *“It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.”* The promises of God had not failed but they had often been misunderstood. Israel's failure to accept God's Messiah does not mean that God failed. The Israelites thought that being a natural, physical descendant of Abraham somehow automatically qualified them to be a part of the people of God and his promises. But they were wrong. God has a plan for world redemption. God carries out his plan by electing and using men and women of faith. God chose one man, Abraham, and promised that all nations would be blessed through his offspring. Abraham had many children other than Isaac, such as Ishmael by Hagar and six more sons by another wife. (Ge 25) But none of these children except Isaac were counted concerning God’s promise. Look at verse 7. *“It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned (counted.)”* This shows that just being a physical descendant of Abraham was not enough. Those who believe God’s promises and live by them are true children of Abraham. God’s promises and blessings are only given to these true children of faith whether they are of Gentile or Jewish descent. Even though Israel failed, God’s salvation work hasn’t failed because his work has been carried out by God’s remnant such as Isaac, Jacob and so on.

Look at verses 10-13. Here Paul points out that God chose Jacob, not Esau even though they both sons of Isaac. And he did this before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad. (11) What does this tell us? How much work can you accomplish and what merit can you have if you are not born yet! This tells us that God's choosing of Jacob was not based on human works or merits. The Israelites mistakenly thought that they were entitled to God's blessings not only because of their decent from Abraham but also because of their works. They thought that they deserved God's blessing because of their obedience to God's law and many other rituals. However, God's choosing Jacob over Esau clearly shows that his blessings totally depend on his mercy and his sovereign will, not on men's works and merits.

If you review the life of Jacob, we might scratch your head, wondering why God chose him over Esau. He was obviously a cheater; he deceived Esau and his father and stole the birthright not belonging to him. He wasn't even a good husband or a father. All his life, he struggled with life and people such as his brother, four wives and an uncle to control his own destiny. He even wrestled with God. It is not until the end of his life that he began to understand the sovereignty of God and appreciate his mercy. He came to understand that God's choice of him had nothing to do with his works and God loved him despite his many shortcomings and patiently endured them.

Let's read verses 11 and 12. *Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger."* Here Paul gives us the reason for God's choosing Jacob over Esau. God did this to make it very clear that his blessings and his grace are granted to those whomever he chooses and not to those who work hard. We are saved not because we are better than others or did more works than other, but because God elected us through his sovereign choice. So we don't have anything to boast. We can only thank and praise God for his mercy.

Look at verse 13. *Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."* I know many people are troubled by the word "hated." However, we shouldn't interpret the word "hated" in terms of sinful human hatred. Rather it should be interpreted as God's just wrath for sin remained on Esau and his descendants. We hate the Nazi Germany but we love German people. A student once said to Dr. Griffith Thomas that he was having trouble with Romans 9, for he could not understand why God hated Esau. After all, this doesn't seem fair. Dr. Thomas answered that he too was having trouble with this passage, but his problem was different. He did not understand why God loved Jacob, for no man deserves God's love.

Look at verses 14-18. Was God being unjust and unfair in blessing one person or nation over the other? Was God being unfair in blessing the Gentiles with the gospel while allowing the hearts of Israel to be hardened against the gospel? The answer is "Not at all!" God can show mercy to anyone he chooses and have compassion on whom he has compassion. God doesn't owe anyone anything. God's choice of whom he will bless does not depend on human desire or effort but on God's mercy." (16) To prove his point, Paul uses an example from Old Testament. From verse 17, we learn that God placed Pharaoh in a high position for a purpose: to demonstrate His power. How was this accomplished? It was done by working many miracles through Moses and delivering the Israelites. Does God have the right and power to harden whomever he chooses in the process of fulfilling his purpose and will? Absolutely! Was God unjust and wrong in doing this? Not at all! God can do no wrong. Pharaoh was a sinner who deserved the righteous judgment of God. Some say that God simply strengthened Pharaoh's heart towards its natural tendency. Others maintain that God actively hardened his heart. Whichever the case, Pharaoh rejected the true and living God and God used him for His own purpose.

Here is a story about R. C. Sproul when he taught a freshman Old Testament class of 250 students at a Christian college. He told them in the first class that there would be three papers: The first would be due on September 30th; the second on October 30th; and

the third on November 30th. On September 30th, he received 225 papers, while 25 students came to him begging for mercy: “Please, Dr. Sproul, we didn’t budget our time wisely. We’ll do better next time. Can we have just a little more time?” Dr. Sproul said, “Okay, you have two days to get those papers in.” “Oh, thank you, thank you, Dr. Sproul!” On October 30th, he received 200 papers. Fifty students were late. They pled, “Please, Dr. Sproul. We had midterms. We had homecoming. Please, give us one more chance.” He said, “All right, you have two more days.” Guess what? On November 30th, 150 turned in their term papers on time. One hundred students were late. “Where are your term papers?” he asked. “Don’t worry about it, Dr. Sproul. We’ll get them to you soon.” He got out his grade book: “Johnson, your paper is late. F!” “But that’s not fair!” “Harrison, F!” “That’s not fair!” “Is it justice that you want?” “Yes!” “All right. You were late on your paper last month. I’m changing your grade on that one to F. Does anyone else want justice?”

Dr. Sproul explains, “If we experience grace once, we’re grateful. If we experience it twice, we’re a bit jaded about it. The third time, we expect and demand it. If God doesn’t choose me, then there’s something wrong with Him, not with me!” But grace, by definition, is something God is not required to give. It’s undeserved. Rather than asking, “Why not everyone?” we should ask, “Why me?”

III. GOD IS THE POTTER AND WE ARE THE CLAY (19-33)

Look at verse 19. “*One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?’*” This question could be paraphrased like this: “How come God find fault with us? We can’t help doing what we do because God made us this way.” Humanly speaking, this question sounds reasonable. However, this question reveals our deep inner problems. First of all, this shows our sinful tendency not to take responsibility for our sins and shortcomings. Instead, we try to blame others just as Adam blamed God and his wife and Eve the serpent for their sins and disobedience. God’s

sovereignty does not rule out man's responsibility. To men, these two appear to be contradictory. But to God, these are compatible. And that is what the Bible clearly teaches us so we must accept it even though this is beyond our understanding.

Secondly, this question shows that we don't really understand who our God is and who we are before God. Look at verse 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?'"* Paul was so repelled by this question that he didn't even bother to answer it directly. Rather, he urges us to really think about who we are before God. Our God is the Creator and thus he has every right over what He has created. He is sovereign. This means that he has the right to do as he wishes without giving an answer or reason to anybody. However, proud men want to question God's right to be God and be equal with God.

To help us to understand his point, Paul uses an illustration from everyday life. Let's read verse 21 together. *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?* Paul's point is that even men are given freedom and right over their possessions. The potter is free to create an expensive museum piece or a cheap pot with the lump of clay. The potter doesn't need to consult the clay and he is not unjust for doing so. If men are free to exercise his freedom and right, then how much more rights does our creator God have over his creatures?

Do you accept that God is the master potter and you are the work of his hand? Do you acknowledge that you are the clay and ready to be formed in whatever way that God wants? Then let us stop talking back to God and complaining: "Why did you make me like this?" Instead, let us be humble before him and let him be who he is by accepting his sovereignty over our lives. Let us thank him and give glory to him by saying, "Lord! Thank you for saving this unworthy sinner. Thank you for many blessings upon me

including family, friends and a ministry where we can grow spiritually and serve others. Please mold me and form me as you wish.”

In today’s passage, we learned that God’s words and his promises have not failed because God has always worked through a remnant according to His sovereign choice. We are one of those chosen remnants. We are chosen not because of our own merits or works but because of God’s great mercy and sovereign will. We also learned that God is the potter and we are the clay. Let us be humble and allow him make something useful and beautiful out of our lives.