

God's Sovereign Mercy

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[0 : 00] Let's pray as we approach God's Word together. Lord our God, we are so blessed that you are a God who reveals himself to us.

And you give us a glimpse, not only into your character, but into your ways with this world and with what you have made. We pray that you would give us your wisdom, open our eyes, submit our hearts and wills to yours, and bless us as we hear your Word tonight.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Phil and I are friends with a Jewish couple. I went to school with a girl. And whenever we get together with this couple, we feel like we have so much in common. We share a love for God. We love talking about spiritual things. We have a respect for the Scriptures. We have a desire to live according to the law of God.

They tell us about their holy days and their festivals, and we say, yeah, we celebrate that too, but in this way and with this meaning. I confess that I even envy them sometimes the way that their whole community embodies such powerful truths with their traditions and the fact that so much of their religious life revolves around food.

[1 : 31] It's a very rich friendship. And yet there's something deeply sad about it. We have so much in common.

They're of the chosen people. So why have we ended up so far apart on the issue of Jesus Christ? It seems so obvious to us, to me and Phil, that Jesus is that Messiah promised in the Old Testament.

So obvious. It all fits together. It's so consistent. It's so connected. So why haven't our friends, and indeed the majority of Jewish people, accepted him?

The Apostle Paul has this burden on his heart as we get to Romans chapter 9. And in fact, he has this burden on his heart constantly.

Have a look with me at the start of the chapter. I'm speaking the truth in Christ. I am not lying. My conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit.

[2 : 42] I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ.

For the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. Now remember, we've cut Romans in half to preach through this year.

But if this was being read in one of the early churches as an apostolic letter, it would have been read in one sitting. There wouldn't have even been a chapter break between 8 and 9, let alone a two-month break, as we've had this year.

And so you remember Wayne said that in chapter 8, we kind of reach this peak of the hope of glory of the new creation that is there for Christians. And Paul says nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's his final statement in chapter 8. But now it's as if this idea of being separated from the love of God stirs up this anguish, this burden within him.

[4 : 04] And his emotion bursts forth for his own people who are not currently sharing that promise, that hope of glory.

The Jews who are in fact at that time cut off from the love of God in Christ. And he's so sincere in what he's feeling.

And what he's about to say, I guess, is so shocking that he has to start with these three affirming statements. I'm speaking the truth in Christ.

I'm not lying. My conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit. I would rather be cut off from Christ if they could be connected to him.

You can imagine as apostle to the Gentiles, his opponents would have maligned him for being a betrayer of his own people against the Jews.

[5 : 08] But here he is saying, believe me, nothing could be further from the truth. I am in unceasing anguish that my own people have not accepted Jesus the Messiah.

And with a bit of a spark from Jesus' fire of love, substitutionary love, he says, I wish I could take their place in judgment, and they take my place in salvation.

I want them to be saved. And it makes no sense in my heart or my head, Paul says, that Israel is not participating in the promises that I've just been describing in chapter 8.

Because, he goes on to say in verses 4 and 5, they are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.

To them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all. God blessed forever.

[6 : 26] Amen. These things should have set the Jewish people up to receive Christ and all the blessings in him.

God had adopted the Jewish nation as his son. He said, You're my son. I'm your father. He made his glorious presence dwell amongst them, and he promised them future glory.

He made his covenant with Abraham. He made his covenant with Moses. He made his covenant with David. He gave them the Torah, the law, showing them how to live the blessed life of obedience.

He took them out of Egypt to become his worshippers, and he gave them every instruction that they needed to build the tabernacle and then the temple in order to worship him aright with sacrifice and praise.

He gave them his great and precious promises, not only of promised land, material blessing, but of a relationship with him, of a new heart, and that they would be used by him to bring the other nations into a relationship with God, that they would be light that other nations would flock to.

[7 : 58] They are the people of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, these chosen ones. They are people in the line of privilege.

And finally, the greatest blessing of all, from them, from their very race, comes the Messiah, who is more than they could have imagined.

Did you notice those words? He is God over all, forever blessed. Amen.

Their Messiah is God come amongst them. Emmanuel, the ruler and Lord of all, Jesus Christ.

And yet, despite all these blessings, it's clear to Paul, and it's clear to those in Rome, and it's clear to us, that the Israelites as a whole have not come under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 11] Certainly some of them did. Obviously, like Paul himself, like the apostles, like Barnabas, who was a Levite priest. Many in Jerusalem, and some in the church in Rome.

But tragically, the majority did not. And perhaps the Roman Christians, those to whom Paul was writing, could even name friends, family members, who still persisted in rejecting Christ.

It was a personal tragedy for them. It was a personal tragedy for them, as well as for Paul. But more than a tragedy, it raised a major theological problem.

And this is something that I hadn't really thought about until I started to look in depth at this passage. They're asking themselves, well, didn't God promise the Jews salvation?

Didn't he choose them? And if he promised, if he chose, and he hasn't delivered, can his word be trusted? And in fact, if it didn't work for them, will it work for us?

[10 : 37] Can we as Christians trust the promises that we have in Christ, that Paul has outlined so far in the book of Romans, such as that God's righteousness is ours as a gift received through faith, that we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, that we have glory ahead of us?

If God's word can fall, fail, be thwarted with the Jews, can that happen with us too?

How can we trust God's gospel if God's chosen people, Israel, remains unbelieving?

Well, Paul is very, very keen for these questions to be answered because you might remember he has said the gospel is the power of God for salvation.

This is the crux of the matter. The gospel must be trustworthy. God's word must be trustworthy. And so we see that Paul continues straight away in verse six.

[11 : 57] It is not as though the word of God had failed. And to show this, Paul first needs to clarify exactly exactly to whom the word or the promise was given.

When they think about the Israelites who were chosen, what exactly did God mean when he said that they were chosen? Who did he choose? And so Paul goes on, for not all Israelites truly belong to Israel and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants, but it is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.

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 descendants. For this is what the promise said, about this time, I will return and Sarah shall have a son.

The Jews claimed their privileges as children of Abraham. You might remember when they had that interaction with Jesus, they said, you know, we're children of Abraham.

And he said, well, you know, could make these children of Abraham out of these stones or whatever. But, but they said, we're children of Abraham. This is, this is what our calling is about.

[13:17] But they knew very well that Abraham had had two sons, Ishmael by Hagar and Isaac, by Sarah. And they happily accepted that the promises of God did not in fact apply to all children of Abraham, but only to the group that descended from the child of promise, Isaac.

From the very beginning of the Jewish nation, a principle had been established. It would not be ancestry, but God's choice that would determine salvation.

But maybe the argument could be made that Hagar was an Egyptian. And so the distinction between Ishmael and Isaac was not fully on promise, but also on race.

So, it could bring us right back to the start. Why hadn't the nation of Israel received what was promised? And so Paul wants to show the principle again, but more sharply this time, giving another example from the Old Testament, where two children are born of the same parents, same father, same mother.

In fact, they're twins, and both their parents are Jews. Yet, one child is chosen over the other without cause.

[14:43] Have a look at verse 10. Nor is that all. Something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor Isaac.

Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose of election might continue not by works, but by his call, she was told, the elder shall serve the younger.

As it is written, I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau. Both Jacob and Esau stood in the national or racial line of the Hebrew people, twins born to Isaac and Rebecca.

And yet, in spite of the fact that Esau would be born first and should have been the heir of the blessings, God exercised his free, sovereign choice and made that really obvious by choosing the unlikely one, the younger one, to become the patriarch Jacob or Israel.

Those who were descended from Esau then became the nation of Edom. And it's about Edom that that quote, that I have loved Jacob, but have hated Esau, applies.

[16:04] And that's from Malachi chapter one, talking about this nation Edom, who had become the enemies of Israel. And, so that there could be no argument that this choice was based on merit, that, ooh, it was because Esau would become the Edom, who were the enemies of Israel, and of course they couldn't be chosen.

No. God announced his will to Rebecca before the twins were even born. So that it was clear that it would not be by works, but by his call, Paul says.

So using this example, Paul's not only shown that the principle of an Israel within Israel, a true Israel or a spiritual Israel, as it's sometimes called, existed, a chosen people amongst the national people, but he started to show that God's purposes are all based in his sovereign grace, not on human works.

Isaac and Jacob did not deserve their status as chosen people. It had nothing to do with them. They were graciously given it by God.

Now, it seems fine to say that. That's a positive, lovely, gracious statement. Isaac and Jacob didn't deserve their blessings.

[17:42] I'm happy to receive what I don't deserve. But what about Esau and Ishmael? That really sounds like they got the wrong end of the stick and a raw deal.

I remember a conversation that I had with a friend when I was at uni. And she wasn't a Christian at that time, but praise God, she did eventually become a Christian, but she was a twin.

And one of her great stumbling blocks in sensing her call to become a Christian, in feeling that God was stirring in her heart, is that her twin sister was not feeling the same.

And she just could not get over how unfair that seemed to her, how painful that was. But there's something that we have to remember before we go on, and why it's a little bit of a shame that we've broken up this book, but it's so meaty we kind of have to.

But we can forget what we've already heard and what Paul's already written to us, what God has already said to us in the earlier chapters. He's given us a foundational truth for understanding where we're at now.

[18 : 58] And that was back in chapter 3. Do you remember these words? The judgment of God on human beings is always deserved.

There ought to be no surprise about that. We know that if we were to stand before God, none of us would measure up to his standards.

Without Jesus, we would be measured on our own merit and we would be found severely wanting. We're all sinners and deserve no mercy.

And so were Isaac, Jacob, Esau and Ishmael. None deserved mercy. All deserved punishment. None deserved election. All deserved hardening. Yet some received God's call and salvation.

[20 : 24] Is it then unfair or inconsistent with who God is that this would happen?

Let's see what Paul has to say. Have a look at verse 14 if you're following along. What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part or unrighteousness?

By no means. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy. And I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.

So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. The context of this statement to Moses is in Exodus 33, where God is revealing himself to Moses as he truly is. He's not defending himself to Moses. He's blessing Moses with a revelation of his character, a revelation of his name, his glory.

[21 : 42] The way this expression is put together, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, is a Hebrew way, a Jewish way of saying, I will do what I want to do.

I will show mercy in a way that is determined by my will alone. I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.

This is who God is. Merciful, compassionate, and yet sovereignly free.

As John Piper says, God's name, God's glory is defined here in his propensity to show mercy and his sovereign freedom in that mercy's distribution.

It depends not on human will or exertion, but simply on God, the God who shows that mercy.

[22 : 51] I will have mercy on whom I have mercy. And what is the alternative to this for those that he does not choose to have mercy on?

It is not, as we might think, that he would cause someone who wants to follow him to turn away from him.

That never happens. There is no category of person who wants to follow God and who is turned away and hardened.

That just isn't a biblical category. The alternative to God's merciful choice, sovereign, free choice of someone, is that he would harden their heart, that it would remain in its unbelief in order to show his power, his holiness, his judgment upon sin.

So verse 17, For the scripture says to Pharaoh, I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.

[24 : 11] So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses. The scripture in Exodus says that Pharaoh both hardened his own heart and had his heart hardened by God.

This is just like what Paul talked about in Romans 1, if you remember, or you can have a look at it later yourself, about giving people over to their sin.

They chose their sin, but God executes his judgment upon them by turning them over to it, that they might go deeper into it, that his holiness in judgment and pouring out his wrath might be more clearly seen.

They choose and God hardens. And so, Paul says, there is no inconsistency in God's character that he would act only to choose some of Israel.

It's always been in his nature, his character, to show mercy for his sovereign will alone, for the sake of his name, his glory. And it's not unjust of him to harden the hearts of some to show his power and holiness, because we know that all have fallen short of God's glory and don't deserve mercy.

[25 : 43] And we know that God remains completely holy in showing mercy to those sinners whom he sovereignly chooses, because he came himself in the person of Jesus Christ to die for our sins so that he would be both just and the one who justifies, holy and merciful.

Knowing this, then, we can approach what Paul says next with much greater clarity. Let's have a look at verse 19. You will say to me then, why does he still find fault?

For who can resist his will? But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is moulded say to the one who moulds it, why have you made me like this?

Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction?

And what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy which he has prepared beforehand for glory, including us whom he has called not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

[27 : 22] Readers of the Old Testament were familiar with the metaphor of God as the potter and Paul uses it here particularly with some content and ideas from the book of Isaiah where Isaiah talks about the potter and the clay in addressing the people of God who've turned things upside down who've put themselves in the place of God who are saying to him in ways as ridiculous and offensive as a piece of pottery saying to the master potter I don't want to be a dog's dish thanks and I don't like the glaze colour that you're using if you wouldn't mind I would like to be a vase or you know it's a silly picture but a powerful metaphor of human rebellion it's not a picture of human beings searching and asking questions of God in a legitimate humble way that's not the point there's no

Paul is not telling people off who are asking genuinely of God he is saying who are you to have a rebellious attitude that says God shouldn't be sovereignly free in what he does with his creation I want to know and I don't like what you've done but coming to God with that attitude won't be tolerated that business of election is God's business not our business we're given a small glimpse into it but we're not asked to try and grasp it from our perspective we can't even hope to understand it from the perspective of us on the potting room shelves and we're never asked to make our response to God on the basis of election we're simply asked to put our faith in Jesus

Christ and Paul comes to that in the last three verses but before we get there let's just recap where we've been and then see how Paul uses these final quotes from the Old Testament Paul is in anguish over the unbelief of the Jews who should be receiving the fulfillment of the promises of God as the chosen people but their unbelief does not show that the word of God has failed because one it was never God's intention that everyone who was a national Jew would be a spiritual Jew that's shown in those stories of Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau God's election of those who would be included in the true Israel was never going to be based on human merit on race or works it was always based on his sovereign free choice that sovereign free choice is not inconsistent or unjust because

God has revealed himself to Moses as exactly this kind of God a God who will have mercy on whom he will have mercy not bound by any human influence or choice furthermore God's sovereign free choice of some over others in national Israel is not unjust because all have fallen short of God's glory and deserve his hardening which would show his powerful judgment and glorious holy name and yet even in that hardening if you look with me at verse 22 even in that hardening he endures with patience the objects of his wrath and he does so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy which he has prepared beforehand for glory us if we're sitting there if the Roman Christians are sitting there asking themselves has God's word fallen does God's purpose in election remain the answer is yes indeed and in fact those who you see that are being hardened are being hardened so that you experience the great riches of his glory and you as Gentiles are in fact not inconsistent at all with God's ways in the Old Testament or his word it has not fallen as indeed he says in Hosea those who are not my people I will call my people and her who was not beloved I will call beloved over have these

[33 : 21] Furthermore, he shows that no one could have expected that the whole of Israel ought to be saved because only a remnant survived.

Verse 27. And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel. Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea. This is picking up the promise to Abraham.

Your descendants will be like the sand on the seashore. The stars in the night sky. So numerous. Though they were like that, only a remnant of them will be saved.

For the Lord will execute his sentence on the earth quickly and decisively. And as Isaiah predicted, if the Lord of hosts had not left survivors to us, we would have fared like Sodom and be made like Gomorrah.

So, are we left with a picture that God has chosen to make a remnant remain despite their willingness to have faith?

[34 : 38] No. What then are we to say? Gentiles who did not strive for righteousness have attained it.

That is, righteousness through faith. This is the same doctrine that has been always preached through the book of Romans. Righteousness through faith.

Remember, there was no difference in the way of salvation for the Jew or the Gentile. It was to be righteousness through faith. But Israel, how were they judged?

Why were they only a remnant? They did not strive for the righteousness that is, they did strive for the righteousness that's based on the law, but they did not succeed in fulfilling that law.

Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone.

[35 : 46] As it is written, see, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

God's word has not failed. The people of Israel were predicted to stumble over a stumbling stone.

And who would that be? But the Lord Jesus Christ. They did not strive for their righteousness on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ.

This is why they have not come in. Now we have two other chapters to explore this further, and we will see whether they had a true chance to hear about this righteousness that is by faith, and whether there is hope for them still.

But let us finish by reminding ourselves of the truths that we have read about our great God. He is a God who could, in his sovereign power, allow all to go to their just punishment.

[37 : 05] And yet, that is not who he is. He is a God of mercy and compassion. That is the revelation of his name, of his glory, of his character.

The wonder, friends, is not that some are lost, but that any are chosen at all.

That any are chosen at all. Shows God's amazing, powerful grace.

So undeserved. Will Israel come to understand that grace? Will they be grafted back in?

Let's wait and see in the coming weeks. Let's pray. God, you are our God, and we are your people, because you have chosen us in your sovereign free mercy.

[38 : 16] Thank you, Lord, that no one goes to punishment undeservingly. But thank you that you have chosen so many.

That you call us to salvation and grant us repentance. Lord, help us to marvel at your grace and mercy.

To not rebelliously argue against you, but to bless your name. That we would be showered upon by you in your great glory.

Lord, help us not to stumble over the stone of Jesus Christ. The foundation stone, the corner stone. But instead, Lord, put our trust in him. And so attain righteousness. By faith, because of your grace.

[39 : 26] We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.