

The Choice of God

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[0 : 00] I thought I'd start today with a song. I'm going to say the first part. I'm going to say, not sing. The first part of the song. And I want to see if you can finish the line.

Okay, you ready? I'm pretty sure you'll get it. Here we go. My God is so... So strong and so mighty. Hey, well done.

Yeah, yeah. That's one of those kids songs which speaks about how big God is. How he created everything. How he is sovereign, as we heard in the kids talk, over everything.

He rules over everything. And so the mountains are his, the valleys are his, and then you've got the jazz hands for the stars are his handiwork too. In other words, it's a song about God being God.

And we often rejoice in this truth, don't we? Well, as we return to the book of Romans today, we come to a passage which speaks about God being God. But this time, it's actually not so easy to rejoice.

[1 : 04] At least not at first glance. Rather, it is a hard passage to understand and to accept. And so let's pray for God's help to understand and accept it, that we might again rejoice in God being God.

So let me pray for us. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word, the Bible. And we thank you also for this passage, which is difficult to understand and difficult to accept.

Father, please help us, we pray, that we might always rejoice in you, our big God. In Jesus' name. Amen. Now, before we get into the passage then, let me give you a very quick recap of what we've seen in Romans so far.

In the opening chapters, Paul spoke about the fact that we've all turned from God, such that there is no one righteous, not even one. All have turned from God, and so all are deserving of God's judgment.

We know that's true, even of ourselves. We know that we're not perfect. And we know that we mess up in various ways. But the great news of those early chapters is also that God so loved us that he graciously gave for us his son, Jesus.

[2 : 15] And Jesus willingly went to the cross to take our judgment in our place. And so whoever believes in Jesus, who he is and what he did, then they will be saved from judgment and given life eternal.

And what's more, this eternal life is secure because once we have accepted God's love for us in Jesus, then nothing can separate us from that love in Jesus.

So if you've got your Bibles there, just have a look at the couple of verses before chapter 9. Verse 38, Paul writes, I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And you see what he's saying? Once we are secure in God's love, then, well, we're secure. Nothing can separate us from it. And so they're great words of joy and comfort, aren't they?

No matter what happens in life, God will always love you and your eternal life is always secure. Yet this joy and comfort, though, is often kind of tempered by the pain we feel when we see someone who is not saved, someone who is not secure in Christ's love.

[3 : 37] Whether it's a friend or a relative or perhaps even your spouse. I saw someone just last Friday who was lamenting that her husband still does not believe.

At 95, he's not a Christian. And it still upsets her. And it's a pain that Paul felt, not just for his friends or family, but for his whole country.

Because not all the Israelites were saved. Which brings us to point one in your outlines and verse one in your Bibles. He says, I speak the truth in Christ. I am not lying. My conscience confirms it

through the Holy Spirit.

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. Why? Well, because I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel.

Now, do you see Paul's pain here? For as he goes around proclaiming the good news about Jesus, he sees many of his fellow Jews rejecting Jesus. And such is his sorrow and love for his people that he would willingly sacrifice himself.

[4 : 48] He would willingly be cut off from Christ. Which means he would willingly go to hell. That's what he's saying. If it meant saving his people, his countrymen. Anzac Day is approaching.

And we remember the soldiers who suffered what seemed like hell for our country. But the real hell is much, much worse. And Paul, he's willing to suffer it if it means saving his country, his people. That's a huge call, isn't it? When you think about it. And it's a huge heart that Paul has for the lost, isn't it? And it's worth pausing, I think, here for a moment and reflecting on Paul's heart for his people.

Asking ourselves whether we share anything of his heart for our people. You know, our neighbours, our community, our friends, our family. What would we be willing to sacrifice to see them saved? We'll come back to this later and especially next week. But here, the fact that not all Israelites are saved doesn't just bring Paul pain. It actually calls into question God's word.

[5 : 57] You see, if there was any race of people in the world who ought to have become Christians, it was the Jews or the Israelites. Have a look at the rest of verse 4. He says, The people of Israel, theirs is the adoption to sonship.

Theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah who is God over all, forever praised.

Amen. Do you see who the Israelites are? They're the privileged people of God. They were adopted as his sons. They had the law, the covenants, the temple.

And when Jesus the Messiah came to earth as a man, he came not as an Australian, but he came as a Jew. What's more, they had God's promises that they would always be his people and God would always be their God.

And yet, many of them don't believe. And so if the gospel is true, then what about God's promises to the rest of Israel? Shouldn't they all be saved?

[7 : 03] Or has God's word to them failed? Do you see how their unbelief calls into question God's word, his faithfulness? And so Paul begins to show us why not all Israelites are saved.

And Paul's answer actually runs over three chapters, chapter 9, 10 and 11. And so chapter 9 today is just the first part of the answer. We need to remember this because this first part is often the hard part to accept.

So what is this first part of the answer? Well, all Israelites are not saved because God's word only ever chose some. Point to verse 6.

He says, It's not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are actually true Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children, he says. Here Paul says, God's word to Israel has not failed. Why? Well, verse 6, Because not all who are born physically as Israelites are true spiritual Israelites.

[8 : 10] Remember the nation of Israel came from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And he's saying, Just because you were physically born into that family, into Abe's family, that nation of Israel, doesn't automatically make you a true child of God.

It's a bit like how people think, of Australia. I've heard many times that people overseas think Australia is a Christian country. They think if you're born in Australia, then you're automatically a Christian.

Now, we know that's not true, don't we? Paul is saying the same thing here about Israel. Just because you're physically born an Israelite in the line of Abraham doesn't automatically make you spiritually one of God's children.

So what does make you spiritually one of God's children? Well, being chosen by God. See the rest of verse 7? He says, On the contrary, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this is how the promise was stated.

[9 : 15] At the appointed time, I will return and Sarah will have a son. Now here, we need to remember that Abraham and Sarah desperately wanted children but could not have them.

And instead of trusting God, Abraham slept with his maidservant Hagar and had a child outside of wedlock called Ishmael. But God said to him, Why did you do that? That's not the child I've chosen for you, that I've promised for you.

I've promised you a child from your own wife, Sarah. And it's through this promised chosen child, Isaac, that you will have lots of descendants, that your offspring will be reckoned.

You see again, verse 8, he's saying, It is not the natural children by physical descent like Ishmael who are God's children, but it is the children chosen by the promise like Isaac who are regarded as Abraham's true children, God's true children.

Paul's point here is that a true Israelite are not those born Israelites, but those whom God has graciously chosen by his word or promise to them. And so it does not depend on race, but grace on God's gracious choice.

[10 : 30] And in case we're not convinced, Paul gives us a second example of God's gracious choice. See verse 10? He says, Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac.

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.

Just as it is written, Jacob, it's one of the twins, I loved, but Esau, the other twin, I hated. You see, here are two Israelites. But unlike Ishmael and Isaac, these two, Jacob and Esau, they have the same father and mother.

In fact, they're even twins. So at this stage, they have everything in common. But it says, Before they had done anything good or bad, God gave a word to Rebekah, saying he has chosen the younger over the older.

I notice two things. First, in verse 11, this is in order that God's purpose in election might stand. That is, God did this to show that it depends completely on his choice, his election.

[11 : 42] It's not as though God looked ahead and saw everything good or bad and then chose the good one. I mean, they ended up both being the bad ones. No, no, God did this to show it depends completely on his choice, his election or selection of one over the other.

The second thing to notice is that it's still actually a gracious choice. He chose the younger over the older deliberately, I think, to highlight his grace or undeserved generosity.

You see, in those days, who had the right to the blessings? Was it the older one or the younger one? It was the older one, wasn't it? And yet God graciously chooses the younger one to receive the blessings to highlight that this choice of his is gracious.

It's generous. Giving the younger one what he does not deserve. But the point here is that God's word has not failed. In fact, God's word has always been effective.

It's just that God's word always chose some, not all. So why are not all Israelites saved? The question we started with? Well, the answer is because God has only ever graciously chosen some, not all.

[12 : 59] Just like God chose Isaac, not Ishmael, Jacob, not Esau, so he's chosen only some Israelites, not all. Now, can I ask, how are you feeling at this point?

How do you feel when you hear that God only chooses some to believe and be saved? How do you feel when you hear that God selects only some to believe but not all?

Well, you might feel like saying, that's not fair. It seems like Paul has solved one problem only to create another problem. One time I was playing the Nintendo Wii with Tim.

It's like a computer game and we're playing baseball and for those who don't know how it works, you have this plastic controller in your hand and you stand in front of the TV and as you swing the controller, your character on the TV swings his baseball back.

Now, the plan was to let Tim win a game and then I'd win a game because, you know, you can't let them win everything because they've got to learn how to lose as well. It'd be nice and easy as well.

[14 : 03] But when it came time for me to win a game, I couldn't beat Tim. He was beating me and I couldn't let that happen. And so, when he pitched the ball, I got my controller, wound it up and swung the controller as hard as I could and hit Tim in the back of the head.

And as blood rushed from his head, I felt sick and didn't care that I was losing. But you see, I'd solve one problem, me losing, by creating another problem, Tim bleeding.

Is that what Paul's done here? You see, he solved the problem why Israel are not all saved. Why are they not all saved? Well, because God didn't choose them all.

Okay, that's one problem solved, but now he's created another problem. How is that fair? How is that just? He solved the problem of God's faithfulness, only to create the problem of God's justice. Which brings us to point three, verse 14. See there? One of you will say to me, then why does, sorry, verse 14, what then shall we say?

[15:10] Is God unjust? Not at all. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.

You see, Paul knew how we'd be feeling at that point, which is why he asked the question for us. And what is his answer? Is God unjust? He says, not at all.

Or better, no way, Jose. Why not? Well, verse 15, for or because God will have mercy on whom he has mercy. It's a quote from Exodus 33 where God reveals his character to Moses, and God is effectively saying, I am God, and so I am allowed to have mercy on whomever I choose.

I am allowed to choose some and not all. And if he's allowed to do this, then it is just. It is fair. In fact, since he is God, then he determines what is just and what is fair.

He sets the rules, sovereign, remember, including his right to choose some and not all. My favourite ice cream is that Connoisseur cookies and cream ice cream.

[16:22] Have you seen that one? It's pretty good, huh? Michelle kindly bought some for me one night. It was on special. We only ever get it when it's on special. But the kids saw us having some and asked if they could have some.

And I said, no, you can't. And then I put some in my mouth and went mmm to rub it in. And they responded by saying, hey, that's not fair.

Now, rubbing it in and going, mmm, that isn't fair. But me saying no to them, well, actually, it is fair. Why? Well, to be honest, I'm the parent, they're the child.

We set the rules, they answer to us, not the other way around. I mean, can you imagine if we all answered to our children, even more than we do now? We'd be eating McDonald's every night and no one would go to school.

We'd be an unhealthy and uneducated society. no, it's actually in everyone's best interest if there is an order where the parents set the rules and the kids answer to us.

[17:21] And because it is like this, then we parents have every right to say no to them. And it is just, it is fair, we're allowed to do that. Well, so too with God. God is God, we are not.

He sets the rules and we answer to him. And that order is in everyone's best interest. If everyone was God, then it would be chaos. But because God is God, then he has every right to choose some and not all.

And that is just. But we also need to remember two things at this point. First, if we really wanted justice, then we'd all have to take the punishment for our own sins.

I mean, that would be justice, wouldn't it? Second, though, God does not have to have mercy on anyone. You see, mercy by its very nature cannot be demanded.

It's not a right or an obligation that we can demand. We have no rights because we are guilty and deserve judgment. Rather, mercy is only something we can beg for. So we cannot demand that God give mercy to everyone.

[18:26] We can plead for it, pray for it, yes, but we cannot demand it. No, God is God and his every right to give mercy to none or some or everyone.

In fact, God even has the right to harden as well. If you weren't uncomfortable, you might be now. Have a look at verse 17. For scripture says to Pharaoh, sorry, start with verse 16, it does not therefore depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

For scripture says to Pharaoh, I raised you up for this very purpose that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Therefore, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

Here, Paul reminds us of that first Bible reading we had where God hardens Pharaoh's heart. Why? Well, so that the world would see God's power and glorify God's name.

We saw that in Exodus as well. But hang on a second. Doesn't that seem a bit selfish and unjust? I mean, God hardens people's hearts just so that people might see his power and glorify his name?

[19 : 34] I mean, who does this guy think he is? God or something? But that's the point, isn't it? We often think our salvation is all about us and yes, we are certainly a big part of it.

But the bigger part is about God being honoured for who he is. It's about God's name being hallowed. It's about God getting the glory he deserves. And the way God's name is glorified is by sometimes choosing to save and sometimes choosing to harden.

But he has every right to do this for his God. And we all deserve judgment anyway. But now there's another problem. You see, we've seen so far that not all Israel are saved because God did not choose all Israel.

That seemed unfair, but we've just heard that we all deserve judgment anyway, and God is God, so he's allowed to do that. He is just. But now there's another problem. If God chooses whom he'll save and whom he'll harden, then what about our choice?

Doesn't our choice matter anymore? Point four. You see, if God chooses, then what about our free will, so-called? If God chooses who will believe and who won't, then how can we be blamed or held responsible for our choice?

[20 : 44] That's the question in verse 19. He says, But one of you will say to me, then why does God still blame us? After all, who is able to resist his will if he chooses everything?

Do you see what he's saying? If God chooses who will believe and who won't, then surely God cannot hold us responsible for our own choices. But look at the answer in verse 20.

But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Shall what his form say to the one who formed it, why did you make me like this? 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?

The answer is effectively the same, isn't it? God is God and we are not. He is the potter, we are the clay. So he has every right to choose to save some or harden others and at the same time still hold us accountable for our choice to believe or not.

We do have a real choice. We all know this, don't we? We make choices every day. In fact, chapter 10 talks about our choice. It tells us to believe in Jesus and it talks about how Israel refused to believe in Jesus.

[21 : 58] And if you're here today and you're not a Christian, then you have a choice to believe or not. And God will hold you accountable for that choice. So the full answer to why not all Israelites believe is because chapter 9, God did not choose all Israel to believe, but it's also because of chapter 10.

Not all Israel themselves chose to believe. Both are true. Just like we saw in our Old Testament reading where God hardened Pharaoh's heart and at the end of the reading Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

Both are true. Chapter 9 in Romans is all about God's choice. He chooses who believes or not. Chapter 10 is all about our real choice to believe or not.

And so these chapters, two chapters, run side by side, like two sides of the one coin. Chapter 9 is 100% God's choice. Chapter 10 is 100% our choice.

So I said to my Bible study group, it's bad maths but good theology. But because it's bad maths, it doesn't make sense to us, does it? I mean, how can God choose completely who will believe or not, and at the same time, we have a real choice to choose whether we'll believe or not?

[23 : 09] How do they go together? Well, Paul's answer is, we're the clay, not the potter. We're not God. We can understand lots of things but not everything.

I mean, if we understood everything, then we would be God, wouldn't we? And I think God deliberately doesn't reveal everything to us to remind us that we're not God, to force us to trust Him because our sinful nature always wants to try and be God.

He sets the rules though, and He chooses who will believe, and at the same time, He would judge us for our very real choice to believe or not. And so this brings us to the first point of application.

You see, we sing, my God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing my God cannot do.

That's true. But then do we actually believe it? We say there's nothing my God cannot do, but then we say, oh, except He cannot choose who will believe and who won't.

He cannot do that and still we have a real choice. I mean, that doesn't seem fair or make sense to us, so He can't do that. He can do everything else, but He can't do that. But again, does not the potter have the right to do this?

[24 : 19] Do we really believe God can do everything, including this? So we can either reject these truths and answer back to God, demanding that He work according to our logic, according to what makes sense to us, according to what seems fair to us as though we are God and He answers to us, or we can remember that God is God.

He is the potter, we are the clay, and so trust He knows what He's doing, even if we don't understand it. That's where Paul ends these three chapters in 1133, praising God, whose wisdom is beyond ours.

What's more, God's purpose in hardening some is so that we who receive mercy might understand how good we've got it. have a look at these last few verses. What if God, verse 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?

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, even us, whom He called, not only from the Jews, but us Gentiles as well?

You see, because of sin, we all deserve judgment, and some are destined for it, and yet, instead of handing down this judgment, God has waited with great patience, it says.

[25 : 47] Why? So that He can graciously have mercy on some, even us Gentiles, and make known to us the riches of His glory that we will share in. You see, if God dished out judgment straight away on those who deserved it, and just left us who had mercy, then we would never really understand just how good we've got it.

That God patiently bears with those destined for judgment so that we might see them, and see the contrast, and realize just how good we've got it. I remember conducting a funeral here that was attended by some non-Christians who hated being in church.

I think it was the parents of the deceased who wanted a church service, but the husband and the other relatives resented it. In fact, one of them made a comment along the lines of, he said, if there really is a God, then I don't want to know Him.

No doubt, it was partly the grief talking, but they had no interest in God. So it was pretty awkward, actually, but worst of all was that they had no hope either.

In fact, the man who made that comment at the crematorium where I did the committal part of it, he didn't want to leave the body. He didn't want it to go. He was crying and going up to it and clinging to it because he had no hope of seeing her again.

[27 : 10] Now, I don't know if he'll ever become a Christian. I mean, God can do anything, but at that point he was a non-Christian, and while my heart went out to him, it also humbly reminded me of how good I've got it.

You see, but for the grace of God, that could have been me. If it was not for God's mercy, that would have been me, angry, without hope, without comfort.

You see, the contrast reminded me of just how gracious God has been to me, and the riches of God's glory that I will share in. Not because I deserve it. I don't. Just ask my wife.

Actually, don't do that. But it's entirely because of God's great grace and mercy, which cost him dearly. It cost him his only son, Jesus, to give this grace and mercy.

And so he has left those destined for judgment here, that we might see how good we've got it. And so far from shaking my fist at God and demanding an explanation for how he could possibly have mercy on some and not others, it moved me to humble thanks that he's actually had mercy on me.

[28 : 18] but it also moved me to do what I could to share this mercy with these people, to have Paul's heart for the lost, and to pray that they too might receive mercy.

And so that's the second and final application for us. The first, remember, was to let God be God and trust him, even if we don't understand. But the second is to rejoice in his mercy towards us, which cost him his only son, and to give humble thanks, to sing, my God is so big, so strong and so mighty.

There's nothing my God cannot do, including choosing some and not others, and still be able to rejoice in it. So let's pray that we would.

Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this hard chapter of your word, but that so clearly reminds us that you are God, and that while we don't deserve it, you have had mercy on us when you were not required to have mercy on anyone.

So Father, we pray that you would help us not to rail against you or demand explanations for things we don't understand, but to let you be God, to trust in you, and to most of all, to rejoice in the fact that you have had mercy on us.

[29 : 45] And Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.