

Who Are You to Argue with God?

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0:00] Thank you.

This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of November 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, Who are you to argue with God? And is based on Romans chapter 9 verses 19 to 33.

And you may find it helpful to have a Bible reading open on page 920 to Romans chapter 9.

Over the last little while I've been preaching through Paul's letter to the Romans. So for those who are visiting today that's sort of why we're reading this bit. It's in sequence from what we've been doing in weeks past.

[1:26] And I'll pray that God will help us to understand and apply in our lives his word to us. God we thank you that you speak to us through the words of scripture.

And we pray now that you will do so. So that we may not only understand. But live out what we learn. And bring glory to Jesus Christ. Amen. A man is charged with fraud.

And his response is to say I had no option. My business was failing. I needed the money. A woman is charged with child neglect. I had to work extra hours in order to have enough money to provide for my kids.

I thought they'd be okay while I was at work for a longer time. Two men arrested after a drunken brawl. Each blames the other for starting the fight.

A husband forgets to collect his kids after work. I had too many things to do. Too many pressures from work. A woman starts an affair with another man.

[2:29] My husband doesn't love me. So I think it's okay. Who do you blame? Who do you blame when you do something wrong or make a mistake?

Do you blame the pressures of work? The economy? Your husband or wife or children or parents? Do you blame your education or the government?

Do you blame some other person? Maybe God. We're good at blaming somebody else.

In fact, people have been doing it ever since the very beginning. In the Garden of Eden, the first people, Adam and Eve, did what they were not supposed to do in eating the wrong fruit from the forbidden tree of the Garden of Eden.

When God approached the man, he said, oh, the woman whom you gave me, she caused me to do it. But implicit in his statement is really a blame of God.

[3:26] God, you're the one who gave her to me. And then when he asked the woman, she says, well, it's actually the serpent. He's the one who tempted me to do it. We're good at passing the blame.

And sometimes even blaming God. There's some legitimacy in that, perhaps. In the verses preceding this passage, we see that God is sovereign in exercising mercy, distributing it to some whom he chooses.

But also that God hardens hearts. For example, the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt in the time of Moses. And so maybe if God is a God who hardens hearts, such as he did with Pharaoh, causing him to sin, then maybe when we fail and make a mistake or sin, we have some reason for blaming God.

God made me do it, perhaps, we could say. He's the one who hardened my heart and caused me to sin and fail. So isn't God responsible then? Can't we legitimately blame God for our mistakes?

Human beings like to play God. We like to be in charge. We like to fulfill what we set out to do. We like to control things.

[4 : 41] We like to think that we know best. You can see that being exercised on Talkback Radio all the time and in the letters to the editor of newspapers. We like to correct God when he gets it wrong.

We like to think that we actually know better than God in these advanced times. Who do we think we are when we blame God? Who do we think we are when we pass judgment on God?

Or talk back to God? Or complain to God? That's the question that's raised at the beginning of this passage that was read for us in Romans 9. In the light of God who distributes freely when he wants to his mercy but hardens the hearts of others.

God who seems to exercise some arbitrariness in dealing with human beings. Paul anticipates the objection, You'll say to me then, why then does he still find fault?

Why does God find fault when he's the one who causes it in the first place? When he hardens people's hearts and allows sin to continue? Why can't we blame God? For who can resist his will, Paul asks?

[5 : 46] If no one can resist God's will and he hardens hearts of people, then surely we can blame God for the problems, the sins, the evils that we commit and that are in this world.

Claiming to be wise, we in fact betray our foolishness. When we think that we know better than God, we're in fact fools.

That's how Paul had described it back in chapter 1 of this letter. Who indeed are you? A human being to argue with God. Paul here is not talking about the person who's inquiring and seeking after God, trying to understand what God is on about and asking questions to pursue faith and to pursue God.

That's not the person he's objecting to here. He's objecting to the person who argues back to God, who criticizes God, who lays the blame at God's feet and says it's God's fault. He's got it wrong.

He's stuffed up somehow in this universe. That's the person that Paul is objecting to in this question statement in verse 20. But who indeed are you? A human being, a mere human being to argue with God.

[6 : 56] And then he uses an analogy that really puts us in our place. Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, why have you made me like this? That is the person who complains to God and says, God, you've made me like this to be a sinner.

It's your fault. I'm not taking responsibility and blame for my sins. I'll lay it with you. Paul goes on in verse 21 with this rather humbling, if not humiliating analogy.

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? He likens us to being lumps of clay.

Hardly very honoring for human beings to be compared like clay. Paul is making a very clear point here. God's the creator. God is God.

We are objects created by him. He's in charge. And he's sovereign. And we have no right to complain. Indeed, Paul in describing us as clay and God as the potter, talks about God making two different things out of the same lump.

[8 :10] There's something for special use, something honored and prized and something that's perhaps mediocre, implying in that I think someone or something rejected by God.

And by talking about it reminds us of what we read earlier in the chapter and saw last week, where God chose one twin brother over the other. Jacob rather than Esau, the younger rather than the elder.

Twins born from the same lump, if you like, the same conception. One whom God loved. One whom we were told in verse 13, God hated.

God is free to choose and to exercise his sovereignty. He's free to love one and not another. Free to extend mercy to one and not another. Free to harden the heart of one but not the other.

God is God. God is free to love one and not the other. And we are mere human beings. And we have no right to criticize or complain or to answer back to God. Why does God, though, exercise his sovereignty in this way?

[9 :11] It isn't, in fact, that he keeps everything hidden and secret from us. But he actually reveals, and Paul tells us in the next two verses, some of the purposes for which God exercises his sovereignty in such random, arbitrary ways, or so it appears to us.

Paul says in verse 22, What if God, desiring to show his wrath? What's the first purpose about why God is sovereign in this way? He wants people to understand his wrath, his anger at sin and evil.

So God, in fact, hardens hearts so that there are sinful, evil people to whom he can show his wrath. That may look mean for somebody like Pharaoh, although it's not.

He got his just desserts. But what God is on about is wanting the world to see that God is a God who has wrath and anger against sin and evil. He's not indifferent to it. It's not that he's blasé or doesn't care about it.

He wants people to see that he is a God who cannot stand sin and evil. But there's a second purpose in that verse as well. What if God, desiring to show his wrath, firstly, and secondly, to make known his power?

[10 :22] That is, in hardening the heart of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt at the time of Moses and the various plagues and the exodus from Egypt, God not only showed his wrath and anger at the sins of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, but he also had opportunity to display his power through the plagues and the miracles and the parting of the Red Sea.

God, in effect, contrived all that sequence of events, astonishing events, so that not only the Israelites but the Egyptians would know that God is God. That it wasn't just a natural occurrence that there happened to be a hailstorm or a locust plague or something like that.

But through a sequence of ten plagues, one after the other, it was clear that God is powerful, not Pharaoh, not Egypt, not any other God for that matter either. So the purpose of the hardening of Pharaoh in the Egyptians' hearts was firstly that God's wrath against sin would be seen, and secondly, that God's power and sovereignty, even over the other Egyptian gods, could also be seen.

But it doesn't stop there, because even those two purposes have an ultimate purpose that Paul shows in verse 23. And what if God 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?

God hardens some hearts to show his wrath against sin and to show his power in the world. But all of that is so that people will see that he is in fact a God of mercy.

[12:00] You see, mercy, where there is no wrath against sin, is devoid of content. Mercy only is mercy when there is God's wrath against sin and evil.

Paul's expressions here are what-if questions, implying that this is in fact the case. This is why God exercises his sovereignty in this way.

And the questions here have no answer, but they beg the answer, you've got no right to complain. It's his authority. What if God, verse 22, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction?

What if God's like that? Who are you to complain? Who are you to think that you can do it better? You can't. That's the impression or the point of that sort of question. Then the second one follows in verse 23.

And what if he's done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy which he has prepared beforehand for glory? What if God does it like this? It's his right. It's his prerogative.

[13:01] We can't answer back. We know no better. But Paul is in fact saying that the reason why God exercises this free and what looks to us to be arbitrary sovereignty, extending mercy to one but hardening the heart of another, loving one but hating the other, accepting one but rejecting the other, is so that people will see God, see his wrath against sin, see his sovereign power in the universe, and also his mercy extended to sinners.

The Christian gospel that we've seen in Paul's letter to the Romans has been expounding these very themes from the beginning. This is not new in effect.

The gospel reveals the wrath of God against sin. It reveals the sovereign power of God in the world. And it also reveals God's righteousness in extending mercy to sinful people.

That's what this letter to the Romans is all about. It's why Paul wrote it for the Roman church and for us 2,000 years later. To understand God. Because the gospel is about God.

A God who is holy and therefore extends wrath. But a God who is merciful. Abundantly mercy. And forgives sinners their sins. And this mercy we've seen in the gospel is secured by the death of Jesus on the cross.

[14:25] That is where God's wrath against sin is poured out on Jesus. But it is where God's mercy to sinners abundantly flows from. From Jesus' death on the cross for us.

Sometimes people ask me a question along the lines of, Why didn't God, when he made everything, keep it perfect? We're told in the Bible, in the first two chapters, that everything was perfect when God made it.

Why didn't he make it so that it could stay perfect? So that Adam and Eve didn't sin in the garden. So their son didn't kill their brother. So that sin didn't pervade the world. And therefore we could live in a perfect place now.

Free from sin and free from evil. Why doesn't God stop sin? And stop evil? And stop terrorism? And stop war? I think Paul's answers to these questions here give us a hint of how to answer that sort of question.

If we lived in a perfect world that had never fallen and knew no sin or evil, we may live in a blissful state and in a relationship with God.

[15:30] But we would not know the depths of the heart of God. But in a sinful world, in a fallen world where there is evil and where God is angry at sin, but merciful to sinners, we actually understand the heart of God far, far better.

It may be that this world is fallen and in decay and groaning for glory as we saw in chapter 8 of Romans. And it is true that God promises a perfect world for his people, a heavenly world where it will be perfect not only at the beginning but for all time.

But God's aim in history is not just to make a perfect world for us to live in and have a nice time. God's aim is that people know him and know his heart.

And therefore we live in a fallen world. Because in a fallen world, God's heart is exposed. He reveals the depths of himself when he is angry against sin, but nonetheless extends mercy to sinners and forgives them.

And in particular on the cross where Jesus died, the wrath of God is poured out because he is a holy God. But the mercy of God is revealed for all to see.

[16:48] Because he is a merciful God. And we see there in the cross of Jesus, the heart of God revealed for all of us to see.

In a way that would never have happened nor need to have happened if the world had been perfect from the beginning and remained ever so. God wants us to know him.

He wants us to know that he is a holy God. And he is angry at sin and evil and rightly so. But he also wants to know that at the same time, and without compromising his own integrity, he is a God of mercy.

And on Good Friday, he showed the world those two things at their full. So Paul's argument throughout this letter has been that salvation is all of mercy.

It is not deserved or earned by any. Salvation does not belong to the nation of Israel either. It is grace, not race.

[17:54] That is the key to the gospel. It is the key to the letter to the Romans. It is the key to chapters 9 to 11 as well. And this chapter began with Paul's concern and anguish over the fact that the people of Israel, the Old Testament people of God, who seem to be specially chosen by God, they do not seem to have embraced their saviour, Jesus Christ.

And he is full of anguish and concern over why is this the case. Is it that God's promises to Israel in the Old Testament have come to nothing? That God is faithless? That he's abandoned his promises?

If he's done that, then how can we trust any promises made to us in the New Testament? But no, Paul says, it's not that God has abandoned his promises to the people of Israel. Because not every Israelite truly belongs to Israel, he said in verse 6.

And now he adds to that point that the true people of God, the true people of Israel, are not of race, but grace. And Gentiles, non-Jews, are included amongst them.

So he says in verse 24, we are objects of mercy, picking up the end of verse 23, including us, whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles.

[19:07] And then Paul backs up his thesis with three Old Testament quotes, which shows that what he's saying here is not new, but it's actually there, embedded in the Old Testament itself, that not every Israelite belongs to God, and that the people of God is not just Israel, but Gentiles as well.

He quotes a prophet, Hosea, those who are not my people, I'll call my people, and her who is not beloved, I'll call beloved. That is implying that people who are non-Israelite, non-Jewish people, the Gentiles is the word for them, they were not God's people in one sense in the Old Testament, they will become God's people.

So Paul is saying, what's happened now with the gospel of Jesus, is exactly what the Old Testament expected would happen. And in the very place where it was said to them, you're not my people, there they shall be called children of the living God.

Then he quotes another prophet, Isaiah, the greatest perhaps of the prophets of the Old Testament, as far as writing a book of prophecy. Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved.

Well here's the other side of Paul's argument, not every Israelite truly belongs to Israel. There might be numerous Israelites in the Old Testament, as numerous as the sand on the sea, but only a remnant will be saved.

[20 : 23] That's Paul's argument already, and he's saying that it's there in the Old Testament. That not every Israelite, just because they happen to be a race of Israel, will be saved. It's by grace, not race.

And then again he quotes from, the prophet Isaiah in verse 29, if the Lord of hosts had not left survivors to us, we would have fared like Sodom, and been made like Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah were pagan cities, in the Old Testament, full of immorality and idolatry, gross sins, and God destroyed them.

But in the context of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham, one of the great heroes of the faith, had pleaded with God for the cities to be spared, for the sake of righteous people living in them.

For the sake of 50 people, he said, will you not spare Sodom and Gomorrah? Yes, God said, for 50 I will. What about for 45? For 40, all the way down to about 10. Will you not spare Sodom and Gomorrah?

Yes, yes, God said, I will. The cities were destroyed. No righteous people were found in them. Paul is saying here something devastating of Israel, quoting our prophet Isaiah, that if God treated Israel fairly, as he treated Sodom and Gomorrah, no one would be left.

[21 : 38] There is no righteous within Israel. The only reason why any Israelites were saved in the Old Testament, and in Paul's day, was grace, grace, not race. And it applies to us who are not Israelite, not Jewish racially, but Gentile.

We are saved by grace, not race. By mercy, not our just desserts. The salvation of any person in any age by God is purely mercy.

We have no claim on God. Nothing we do warrants God saving us, forgiving us, calling us to be his own. So who then is to blame for the failure of the people of God?

The ancient Israelites. Is it God? Because of his hardening of their hearts, or something like that? No, Paul says Israel is to blame. Yes, it's true that God is sovereign.

He hardens hearts, he extends mercy to others. He is sovereign and free to do as he pleases. But without compromising that sovereignty, Israel is to blame for its own sins and failures to receive the Messiah.

[22 : 50] They can't blame God and say, God, you made me do it. They are culpable and guilty of their own sin. Pharaoh, whose heart was hardened by God, was guilty of sin.

Indeed, Pharaoh himself acknowledged that in the book of Exodus. Judas, Judas, in one sense raised up by God to betray Jesus, to lead to the cross for the glory of mankind, he's guilty of sin.

He can't blame God. And sinners, all of us included, have no excuse and no one to blame for our own failings and sins, in living, not living up to God's standards.

And the last person we should ever try and blame, is God. So Paul acknowledges what looks to be rather ironic, in fact, in his day.

The Gentiles, the non-Jewish people, who for hundreds of years had not really pursued faith in God, they actually find it. But the Israelites, who for hundreds of years have pursued a righteousness with God, have failed to attain it.

[23 : 59] It doesn't quite look fair. Paul says in verse 30 onwards, what then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is righteousness through faith.

But Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. And why not? What went wrong for the Israelites in their search for righteousness?

Verse 32 tells us, because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. That is, Old Testament Israel, by and large, failed to attain righteousness, because they looked in the wrong spot.

They pursued the wrong thing. They thought they could achieve righteousness and salvation from God, by being obedient to the law, and accumulating a whole stack of good works, that would somehow give them entry to heaven.

They couldn't, and they didn't. They thought they could stand before God on their own merits, and say, God, we've been good people, we've been good Israelites, we've kept your law, we've done what you've said.

[25 : 05] And indeed, in Paul's day, some of the Jews were meticulous in trying to keep every little detail and minutiae of the law. But they couldn't, and they didn't.

And the sad irony is, that the one who came to rescue them, and bring them salvation, they failed to see. Because their eyes were blinkered down the wrong path. And they tripped up on him.

The building was ablaze. And the room was full of smoke when the man awoke, and he realised that he had just minutes to try and escape the burning building.

But his door was locked, and he couldn't open it. He tried battering it down, it was a solid wooden door, and he couldn't get it to budge. He decided to take a run-up for it, in his desperation to get out of the room.

But running at the door, he slipped and tripped on the bundle of keys on the floor, crashed into the door, knocked himself out, and was then burnt to death.

[26 : 10] Ironically, the very means of his rescue, the bunch of keys on the floor, were what caused him to trip up, and fall. So is it, with many people, with Jesus.

He is the key for our rescue, the key for our salvation, the one whose death means a relationship with God, and the forgiveness of our sins. But if we're pursuing, somehow, salvation by our own brute strength, or ability, or obedience, or goodness, or our good works, then we will fail to see him, and indeed trip up on him.

Those who trust in him and his death, find salvation from God, but those who don't, try and pursue salvation, through their own means and ability. So Paul says, at the end of verse 32 and verse 33, at the end of this chapter, they have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it's written, again quoting from the Old Testament, see, I'm laying in Zion a stone, that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall.

But whoever believes in him, not it, will not be put to shame. That is about Jesus. He is the stone on whom many trip and fall, but he is the key to rescue.

And for those who rely on him, salvation will be found, and on that final day, they will be vindicated, not put to shame, and welcomed into God's perfect heaven. But for those who are pursuing their own righteousness, by their own good works, they'll keep tripping up on Jesus.

[27 : 44] And the warning about ancient Israel applies to us as well. Because in every generation, people, human people, because of our pride, want somehow to achieve our own salvation.

We want to think that on that last day, we can stand before God and say, God, you must let me in because I'm good enough. I've done some good things. I've been baptized. I've gone to church.

I'm a nice citizen. There's a whole string on my CV here that means you should let me into heaven. But the people who pursue salvation in that way are seeking their own glory and their own works.

And they will necessarily, therefore, trip up on and fail to rely on the one who came to bring them that salvation, Jesus Christ. Because when we turn and trust in Jesus, we put aside our own abilities, our own works, our own claims.

The gospel is humbling, even humiliating. Because the gospel demands that we come to God empty-handed, acknowledging our spiritual bankruptcy, and saying to God, God, this is all of mercy and none of me.

- [28:59] I have nothing to offer or contribute. I have failed to live up to your perfect standards. I've fallen short of your glory. But God, in your sovereign mercy, you extend that mercy to me in Jesus' death.

The gospel, you see, demands a change of mind. It demands that we acknowledge our own failure. And accept the blame for that ourselves and not blame someone else or God himself.

And the gospel demands we change our mind and acknowledge that God is God. And he knows best, not us. Because the gospel says we're to blame and that God is God.

Sovereign in his mercy. And none would be saved without mercy. And thank God that some are, because he's merciful.

Amen.