

God Who Shows Mercy

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Please be seated. And you may like to have open the passage from Romans, page 920 in the Bibles in the pews, page 920.

Romans chapter 9 and looking at verses 1 to 18 that was read for us earlier. Well the election is over and now comes the real question.

How long will it be until election promises are broken? And will the broken promises be core promises or not? Because every government it seems, doesn't matter what colour it is, raises that question of broken promises.

God foreknew us before the foundation of the world. He predestined us before the foundation of the world to be like Jesus Christ.

And then in our own lives he has called us into a relationship with him. He has justified us, that is, declared us righteous and acquitted of our sin. And as we saw two weeks ago, will certainly one day glorify us in heaven.

[1 : 17] That is a certain progression. A chain that cannot be broken of five things that God has done or will do for us. Moreover, we saw last week that nothing can prevent this from occurring.

So the chain that's begun, foreknown, predestined, called and justified, will certainly be completed when we're glorified and nothing can stop that happening. No one can effectively be against us.

No one can effectively bring a charge against God's elect. No one can condemn. And no one can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

We've also been reassured that nothing, in fact, in the whole of creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Height nor depth can't. Things present nor things future can't.

Powers, dominions, rulers, authorities, doesn't matter what we could name, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. God, who is sovereign, will not be and cannot be thwarted in fulfilling his promises that he's made for us.

[2 : 23] He is utterly faithful to what he pledges he will do for us, for our good. And the death and resurrection of Jesus is the clearest guarantee of the final fulfillment of all of God's purposes and promises.

But there is a problem. And that problem comes here. Because God has made election promises not only to us in Christ, that is, chosen or elected us.

But in the Old Testament, he makes the same sort of promises to the people of Israel. Israel. And for Paul in his day, as indeed we could well say for us in our day, it appears that by and large the Israelites are not saved.

Well may they say, how odd of God to choose the Jews. But it seems that in our day, as in Paul's day, such a choice has come to nothing.

And that issue then brings into question God's character. Has he broken his election promises to the people of Israel when you get to the New Testament?

[3 : 36] And therefore, if he has, is not God unreliable after all? Has his word failed to Israel in the Old Testament?

Surely the election promises of Israel, when you read the Old Testament, are certainly core promises. You can't sideline them as though they're secondary promises.

And if God has broken his promises to Israel, then how can we trust the promises that he makes to us? And the glory and grandeur that we've seen in the last few weeks in Romans 8, full of absolute certainty and confidence and assurance of the fulfillment of God's promises for us, his elect in Christ, how can we trust those promises?

If God has broken his election promises to Israel, then his promises to us carry no weight at all. Now that's a real dilemma for St. Paul. It's a real dilemma in his day, because the church of his day was a real mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish, what are called Gentile Christian people.

For us in our day, most of us probably are Gentile by race. That is, we're not Jews by race or Israelites by race. But in Paul's day, the church was much more of a mixture of Jew and Gentile.

[4 : 51] And we've seen that already in Romans several times, that this issue of the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles within the Christian church is quite a difficult one.

So Paul has stressed, for example, in chapter 1, that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God and is the power to save for the Jew first and for the Gentiles. Same gospel for both.

Chapter 2 told us that God shows no partiality between the Jew and the Gentile. Chapter 3 tells us that both Jew and Greek are equally under the power of sin.

And moreover, God, at the end of chapter 3, we're told, is the God of both the Jew and the Gentile. In chapter 4, we saw the necessity of faith in Christ for the Jew as well as for the Gentile.

And later on in this letter, when we get to the practical parts of it, in the last few chapters, we see the overarching concern in the practical exhortations to live in harmony with each other, care for the weaker brethren, and all of that is in the context of the difficulties of relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians.

[5 : 57] So it's a big issue for Paul, and it seems to be a big issue in the Roman church. And in many ways, Paul has been arguing about the gospel, but now this problem is raised.

What about the people of Israel from the Old Testament? Haven't God's election promises to them been broken? Now for Paul, this issue is doubly pertinent because he was a Jew.

He was a Pharisee, and before his conversion to Christ, he was an arch enemy of Christians and sought to persecute and put them to death. But then, as I'm sure many of you know, was wonderfully and dramatically converted on the road to Damascus, where he was heading to in order to continue persecuting Christian people.

So Paul begins this chapter with a deep, heartfelt anguish at the fact that so many Jewish people are not Christians. I'm speaking the truth in Christ, he says.

I'm not lying. My conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit. I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. And he's speaking about the Jewish people.

[7 : 02] Now what an abrupt change from those wonderful verses at the end of chapter 8. But we're not moving into a digression here. This is part of the essential argument of the letter to the Romans.

It is an essential part of the gospel that Paul is dealing with here, as we'll see shortly. So concerned is he for the Jewish people who seem not, by and large, to have become Christians, that Paul is willing to swap places with them.

He says, If only I could be cut off from Christ for their sake. He's just said that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. But he says in verse 3, For I could wish that I myself were accursed, cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred, according to the flesh.

That is talking about Jews, racial Jews descended from Abraham. Now the issue is that all these election promises that are made to Israel seem to have come to nothing.

The election promises Paul summarizes with eight things in the next two verses, verses 4 and 5. Theirs is the adoption, he says. The same idea that he's used in chapter 8 for Christians, that we're adopted into God's family by God's grace and mercy.

[8 : 16] The spirit within us enables us to call God our Father as his adopted children. That is a privilege that belongs to Israel in the Old Testament. There, even as early as the book of Exodus chapter 4, the people of Israel are called the sons or children of God.

Theirs is the glory, Paul says. The end of the chain that is promised to us in Christ is glorification. Theirs already was the glory. The glory in particular in the Old Testament being the presence of God that filled the temple, before that the tabernacle in the midst of God's people.

Theirs was the glory. Theirs was the covenants. In particular, the covenant pledge of promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12, to Moses and the people of Israel in Exodus 19, to David in 2 Samuel 7.

They're the three great covenant promises of the Old Testament. They belong to Israel. Theirs are the covenants, Paul says. And then the next three things. Theirs was the giving of the law.

When at Mount Sinai in the time of Moses, about 1400 BC, God gave down with fire and thunder on the top of the mountain, his tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments to Moses and the people of Israel.

[9 : 27] They all heard his voice. Give those words. And then Moses heard a number of other laws that were given, and he later wrote them down. That was a privilege to the people of Israel. That was part of their election promise.

Theirs was the worship, Paul says. The temple, the priests, the sacrifices, the whole institution of Jewish worship, which is perhaps so foreign to us, remote to us, and yet was an expression of the privilege of relationship that God gave the people of Israel, so that they could keep approaching him despite their sin, and worship him as their God.

Theirs were the promises, he says. Summarising all of those things, the promises for the future, for glory, for peace, for stability, for land, for inheritance, for descendants, and so on.

All of those things were the privileges, the election promises to the people of Israel. But more than that, seventh in this list, Israel descends from the patriarchs.

In particular, three people. Abraham, his son Isaac, his son Jacob, whose stories are told in some detail in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis.

[10 : 34] But not only does Israel come from the patriarchs, but from Israel will come then the Messiah, Paul finishes his list by saying, the Messiah is literally the anointed one.

A Hebrew word, the Greek equivalent, is the word Christ, also meaning the anointed one. He's promised in different ways, in different places in the Old Testament.

As a king who would come, as a prophet who would come, almost a glimpse of a priest who would come, a great person who would come and bring peace and stability, and the fulfilment of God's promises for God's people.

Indeed, Paul says of the Messiah here, at the end of verse 5, that he is overall God blessed forever. That the Messiah is in fact a divine figure.

Is God himself come. Now that is an extraordinary summary and list of the promises of the Old Testament. They are the dominant themes of the Old Testament.

[11:28] They are not secondary issues or peripheral things. They are core promises from the Old Testament for the people of God, Israel. But in Paul's day, it looks as though that rich heritage of promise has withered and died.

It looks as though God has given up on his people, Israel. It looks as though God's promises are null and void. That they have fallen and failed. That God has abandoned those promises and that people.

And therefore it raises the serious dilemma that God is unreliable. That he doesn't keep his promise. And his word fails. Now that is an important issue.

If God is unreliable, then we shouldn't be Christians. There's no point in being Christian. If God is unreliable, all the great promises that we've seen in recent weeks to us are just hot air.

Political propaganda perhaps. But the function of the Bible for us is to attest to the reliability of God. So that what God says, he invariably does.

[12:41] In both Old and New Testaments. And one of the reasons that the Bible is like that is to encourage us to have faith. For faith in God is not a leap in the dark.

As though we know nothing about God, it's total mystery, but I'll just jump in the dark and have faith in God, blind faith. Not at all. That's not what the Bible ever commands. But rather the Bible tells us story after story about what God says, what he promises, what he does, to show us that he's reliable and he's worthy of our trust.

When you meet somebody, you don't know much about them. After a while, as you get to know them, you work out whether you can trust them or not. If you can trust them, probably you'll continue as their friends and in a relationship of friendship or maybe more with them.

If you don't trust them, probably the friendship won't blossom and flourish. So it is with God. As we read through the Bible, we see time and time again his reliability, his absolute trustworthiness.

And therefore, our faith is warranted. There is evidence for our faith. We can trust him. So many things he does when he promises them that the promises that are yet to be fulfilled, we can trust that he will.

[13:55] But if not, if God is found to be unreliable, then we have little reason to be Christian at all. So this is an important issue. Is God unreliable?

Has his word failed for the people of Israel in the Old Testament? Well, Paul now goes on to say very clearly and definitely, no way.

In verse 6 is the summary of his argument here. It is not as though the word of God had failed. That's his point, his argument, his thesis, if you like.

And now he'll go on to support it. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel. That is, there is a misunderstanding of Old Testament promise if you think that every Israelite, every person who's descended from Abram, will be saved, will receive the fulfillment of the election promises, if you like.

That's not what God's intention was in the first place. He gives now two examples for that. The first example comes from the very children of Abraham, the very first person to whom the promises were made.

[15:03] Abraham had in the end two sons. Ishmael, who was the son through the maid of his wife, because Abraham had given up trying to get a son through his wife.

And then later on came the son through his wife, promised directly by God, through his wife Sarah, called Isaac. To whom were the promises of God to Abraham passed on?

To all those racially descended from him? No, not at all. Because as you read the book of Genesis, you realize that the promises are extended to Isaac, but not Ishmael. Ishmael is in fact the one through whom Arabs and Muslims today claim their descent.

But the promises were not made to Ishmael, but only to Isaac. So not all Israelites in the sense, truly belong to Israel. Not all racial descendants of Abraham receive the promises made to Abraham.

Now the second example is actually much clearer. The second example comes in verses 10 to 13. This is the next generation now. And Isaac and his wife Rebecca have twins.

[16:13] And God chooses one of the twins, not both. He doesn't even choose the elder, which is what we may well expect, especially in an old culture like this, where the firstborn male would be the key inheritor of his father's blessings and property and so on.

But God surprisingly chooses the younger of the twins. He doesn't choose Jacob the younger, rather than Esau the elder, because Jacob's a good person, or full of faith, or a nice bloke.

He's not. As you read the story of Jacob, he's full of deceit. He's a bit of a trickster, trying to swindle his brother, his uncle, and so on out of various things.

There's nothing that commends Jacob. God didn't choose Jacob because he said, oh, he's a good one. Esau's the baddie. I'm not going to choose him. God made what we could almost say is an arbitrary choice.

Before the twins were born, before they were born, he said, the elder shall serve the younger. That is, I've chosen the younger. Before they'd ever done anything, before they had anything to command them to God at all.

[17:22] So see what Paul says in these verses about these examples. Firstly, verses 7 to 9 is the example of Isaac and Ishmael. 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's not the children of the flesh, that is, racial descent from Abraham, who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. But this is what the promise said about this time I'll return and Sarah shall have a son.

A promise that God made to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17, 18. Nor is that all. Something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband.

Literally, the idea is through one conception. She had twins, that is. And he was, the father is Isaac. Even before the twins 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.

That is, God's sovereign choice is what determines it. She was told, the elder shall serve the younger. Quoting again from the book of Genesis. As it's written, I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.

[18:32] Now they're extraordinary words to attribute to God. I have loved Jacob, well we could well understand that, but I have hated Esau. Can we attribute to God such arbitrary love, hate?

We'll probably hear the words are more to do with action than emotion. And probably it's a Hebrew idiom. Jesus used this same sort of idiom when he said that you should hate your family members and love God.

He didn't mean in a sense that we might think of hating your family and hating your mother and father, but the Hebrew idiom to say love one and hate the other is to express a comparison.

Love God above your family. So here is probably the expression, Jacob I've loved, he's my preference, he's the one I've chosen above Esau. It's probably the expression, what the meaning of the expression is.

But even so, such an expression of favoritism, snacks of unfairness. Can we attribute that sort of unfairness, that favoritism to God?

[19 : 39] It appears and is, in a sense, totally arbitrary. It's not as though God's loving the good one. He doesn't. Both of them are actually bad. Why doesn't he choose Ishmael?

Why doesn't he choose Esau? Why does he choose, in particular, Jacob? And if God exercises such a sovereign choice, such a predestination, which is what's going on here, as we saw two weeks ago, applies also to us, then does this mean that Jacob, or us as Christians, predestined by God, we're just puppets, we're pawns, we've got no choice in the matter, no say?

Does it mean, therefore, that there's injustice on God's part? Well, that's the dilemma that Paul faces here. He says, he asks the questions in verse 14, what then are we to say?

Is there injustice on God's part? Well, of course there isn't. Paul's response here is very important for us.

We may think the argument is a little bit theoretical or technical, but actually he's dealing with very important issues. At one level, he doesn't answer the question, that God is just.

[20 : 51] Because in the end, justice is not the key issue. Paul addresses the question, is there injustice on God's part, by answering according to mercy.

He says in verse 15, 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.

Or he still may say, where's the justice in that? How does that answer the problem of injustice? Mercy is undeserved. Not one person deserves the mercy of God.

If God meted out justice only, no one would be saved. Ever. The point is, no one who is not elected by God, is treated unfairly.

That is, nobody who is, we might say, rejected by God, not chosen. They're not treated unfairly. Esau wasn't treated unfairly. Ishmael was not treated unfairly, by God.

[22 : 01] Now the quote, here in verse 15, about I will have mercy, on whom I have mercy, I'll have compassion, on whom I have compassion, is quoting from the book of Exodus. The context of the quote, is that the people of God, at Mount Sinai, have sinned, by making a golden calf, to worship.

Moses is on top of the mountain, receiving the commandments, and laws from God. Down the mountain, the people of God, under the leadership now of Aaron, have bowed down, in idol worship, of a golden calf.

God says to Moses, that he will destroy Israel. That is justice. Israel deserves, to be destroyed, for such a gross act, of idolatry.

Moses prays. Indeed, in his prayer, he virtually says, what Paul has said, at the beginning of this chapter, destroy me instead. And God says to Moses, I'll have mercy, on whom I have mercy.

I'll have forgiveness, or compassion, on whom I have compassion. I am free, to exercise, such mercy, and compassion. I am not bound, by anyone, to give mercy, or compassion, in any place.

[23 : 12] God is sovereign, and free, to distribute his mercy, to whomever he pleases. That is the point, of the quote to Moses, that Paul quotes here, in verse 15.

The language emphasizes, God's absolute independence, and freedom, to distribute mercy, according to however, he wants to do it. If he wants to be merciful, he can, he will.

If he doesn't want to be merciful, he can, and he will. And if he isn't, no one is treated unjustly, or unfairly. So Paul says, in verse 16, it depends not on human will, or exertion, but on God, who shows mercy.

That is, nobody is saved, by their human will, by their exertion. God is not prompted, or forced, or bound, by any person's good deeds, or noble acts.

People are saved, only and entirely, by God's free mercy. That he decides, where he distributes it. Now this doctrine of, predestination, of God's sovereign mercy, is actually a very humbling doctrine.

[24 : 27] But it lies at the heart, of the gospel of God. We have no claim, on the mercy of God. We do not deserve it.

None of our good acts, many though they may be, give us any claim on God, to forgive us, or be merciful to us. He is absolutely free, to distribute his mercy, to whomever he wishes, or not to distribute it, to whomever he wishes.

And if he refuses, to extend his mercy to someone, they are not treated, unfairly or unjustly. And therefore God himself, is not unjust.

Israel at Mount Sinai, did not deserve mercy, but they received it from God, and were not punished, were not destroyed, for their sin. So too with us, who are Christians.

We do not deserve God's mercy. We have no claim on God, for his mercy. If we are recipients of it, it is purely because, in his sovereign choice, he has decided, and predestined us, to receive his mercy.

[25 : 38] Paul gives a final example, of this in verses 17 and 18. Israel at Mount Sinai, received mercy. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, in the events leading up to that time, did not.

So Paul says, in verses 17 and 18, for the scripture says to Pharaoh, quoting again, from the book of Exodus, 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.

So then he has mercy, on whomever he chooses, and like for Pharaoh, he hardens the heart, of whomever he chooses. Sometimes we think, that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and all that God did, was to confirm that.

That's not quite true. Pharaoh was, was recalcitrant with God. God did harden his heart further. But the book of Exodus, makes it clear, that before Pharaoh, ever hardened his heart, God had determined to do it.

It is God who instigates, the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. Is that unfair? No. Pharaoh was not treated unjustly. He deserved in the end, the punishment, that God meted to him.

[26 : 56] It was also not unfair, because the purpose, for which God, hardened Pharaoh's heart, was not an act of meanness, against the Egyptian king, but was rather, so that God's own glory, would be seen, through the many plagues, and miracles, and especially the miracle, of the Exodus, of the people of Israel, from Egypt.

Through Pharaoh's hardness, Paul has said in verse 17, backing up, what the book of Exodus tells us, is that God's name, and glory, are proclaimed. See, the issue, is not one of harshness, on those who are not elected, by God.

They do not deserve mercy, and none of them, ever complains to God, that they're not chosen, and they want to be in the kingdom. And if we criticize God, for rejecting anyone, as though somehow it's unfair, or God is unjust, then our view, betrays a mindset, of our works, rather than grace.

For if we think, it's unfair of God, to choose us, but not to choose that person, or that person, then what we're actually saying, is that salvation, is through what a person does, and not through grace, or mercy.

And indeed, the gospel of the Bible, we're saying, is completely wrong. See, a reason why I think, Christians resist, the doctrine of predestination, and this sovereign mercy, of God, and his freedom, to distribute mercy, to whomever he wills, or not to, is because we don't, fully understand grace, and the nature of sin.

[28 : 41] Human pride, you see, demands that, we do something, we contribute, or we achieve something, for our salvation. But we contribute nothing. If we contribute something, the trumpets that will blow in heaven, will be our own, not God's.

But the extraordinary thing, is that anyone is saved at all. That's God's mercy. That's his grace. So then, is God like a politician, breaking his election promises, to Israel?

Is it, as Paul raised, in the opening verses, of this chapter, that the promises made to Israel, and all the privileges, extended to them, listed in verses 4 and 5, that they've come to nothing, that God is unreliable?

Not at all. Are God's promises, just political propaganda, without substance? Not at all. Does God lack credibility, in the eyes of the electorate?

Not at all. Because God's promise, never extended, to every single person, racially descended from Abraham. He chose Isaac, not Ishmael. Jacob, not Esau.

[29 : 51] Later on, the southern kingdom, not the northern kingdom. Later on, a remnant, and not the main majority, of the people of God. That has always been, the way God has worked. Because in the end, the promises of God, that were made to Abraham, were extended, not to children of the flesh, but those who exercise, the faith of Abraham.

A point that Paul has made, in a lengthy argument, in Romans 4, and also at the end, of Romans chapter 2. The true Israel, you see, are those who have faith, in the Messiah, of Jesus Christ.

Not those who are, racially descended, from Abraham. The true Israel, are people who are Christians. Christians, whether of Jewish descent, or not. We're the true Israel, of the New Testament.

We're the ones, to whom the promises, come. And that shows, the fulfillment, of God's promises, and the fact, that his word, still stands, his promises, still stand, that he is in fact, totally reliable, and is keeping the promises, that he originally made, to Abraham, 4,000 years ago.

Now maybe, at this point, at the end of this sermon, you think that this is, a bit of a, theoretical argument. A bit difficult to follow, it is in some respects. It certainly lacks, in perhaps, practical application.

[31 : 06] But the issues here, are very important. They are, I think, mind shaping. And we must remember, that one of the reasons, for the gospel, and one of the things, God is looking for, from us, are reshaped minds, renewed minds.

So when Paul gets, in chapter 12, to the practical part, of Romans, the very first thing, he says, is that we are to be people, whose minds, are renewed. That is, that our thinking, is right.

So that we think, the right things, about God, and the gospel, and the world, and about us. Not wrong things. Because if we don't think, right things, we'll never do, right things. So our thinking, has got to get right.

And the issue, of predestination, and mercy, as we've seen it, in these verses, difficult though it is, is central, to the truth, of the gospel. And we must also remember, that the gospel, is the gospel, of and about God.

And we must get God right, if we are to get right, with God. And the God of the Bible, is a God, who sovereignly, extends mercy, to those, whomever he chooses.

[32:12] You see, he's greater, than mere justice. If God stopped, at justice, none would be saved. There'd be no gospel. But the gospel, of mercy, in fact, rather than, revealing God, to be unrighteous, and unfair, reveals him, to be righteous.

Sovereign mercy, does not compromise, the righteousness, of God. And if we fail, to grasp, this sovereign mercy, of God, I think in the end, we fail, to grasp the gospel.

And that's pretty important. But there is also, a little practical, application here. If it is, God of God, to choose the Jews, then as somebody else, has added to that rhyme, it's not so odd, as those who choose, a Jewish God, but spurn the Jews.

Paul is anguished, for the lost, at the beginning, of this chapter. He agonizes, over the fact, that his kinsmen, his Jewish, fleshly Jewish, kinsmen, are by and large, not being converted.

His agony, and anguish, for his unconverted, kinsfolk, ought to be a model, for us. In part, a model for us, for Jewish evangelism, so that the people, who are racially descended, from Abraham, we long to see them, converted to their Messiah, Christ.

[33:29] But also, for our own kinsfolk, whether or not, they're Jewish of descent, that we are to be, in agony, and anguish, for them, if they're not yet saved. Praying for them, and sharing the gospel, with them.

Because this doctrine, of predestination, and the sovereign mercy, of God, does not in any way, sort of undercut, the importance, and necessity, of sharing the gospel. As we'll see, in two weeks time, it actually is an impetus, and stimulus to us, to keep on preaching, the gospel.

Because that's the means, by which God's predestination, is affected, in people's lives. So we should love people, pray for them, be in anguish, for them, and preach the gospel, to them.

So that they can be part, of God's kingdom, and recipients, of his sovereign mercy. Amen.