

God's Sovereign Choice

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[0 : 00] The early morning service this morning at St. John's didn't know it and so I was left singing it by myself, which was not good, didn't go down well. Anyway, here we go. Ready? My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing my God cannot do.

Yay! That's very encouraging. That's excellent. Yeah. And it's one of those kid songs that tells us about God being God. You know, he's so big, so mighty, there's nothing he cannot do.

And it's a truth we often rejoice in, isn't it? Well, as we return to the book of Romans tonight, we come to a passage that speaks about God being God.

But this time, it's not so easy to rejoice in it. At least not at first glance. Because this is a hard passage to understand and an even harder one to accept.

So thank you very much, Mark, wherever you are. So why don't I pray again that God might help us to understand it and accept it, that we might continue to rejoice in our God who's so big and mighty.

[1 : 12] Let me pray again. Gracious Father, we do thank you again for your word. Lord, please help us, we pray, to sit humbly under it, to understand the things we can understand, and to accept the things we can't, knowing that you are God and we are not.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, given we're picking up Romans again after a long period of time, I can't remember when we started doing it at 5pm, and I asked this morning, they couldn't remember either.

So it's been a while. So let me quickly recap where we've come from. The opening chapters of Romans, Paul points out how there's no one righteous, not even one.

Everyone, at some point or other, has turned away from God and rejected God's rule over our lives, which is what the Bible calls sin. And because of sin, we are deserving of judgment.

But the good news of the gospel is that God gave his son to open a new way to be made right with God by faith or belief in Jesus.

[2 : 20] What's more, this faith in Jesus gives us life eternal, and it's guaranteed, it's secured by God's love. In fact, that's how Paul ended the chapter 8, just before our chapter tonight, on the slide, the next slide.

He wrote, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. They're great words of assurance, aren't they?

Nothing can separate us from God's love, which means our life eternal is secure. For it's God's love which sent God's Son to give us that life.

And yet, as we look around at our friends or family who don't yet know this love, who are not yet saved, our hearts can ache for them, can't they?

Whether it's a friend, a relative, a parent. In fact, it's sadly or too common to hear of children who grow up in churches and then often walk away from church and from Christ.

[3 : 35] It can cause us pain. It certainly pained Paul when he saw that not all of Israel was saved. Have a look at verse 1 to 3. Can you hear Paul's pain?

Feel his heartache? For as he goes around proclaiming the good news of Jesus, he sees so many of his fellow Israelites rejecting Jesus.

And such as his sorrow and love for his people, he would willingly sacrifice himself, cut off from Christ and life eternal, if it meant his own countrymen and women would be saved.

Here is Paul's heart for the lost. And I wonder if we share something of his heart. We'll come back to that later and particularly next week.

But here, the fact that not all Israel are saved doesn't just bring Paul pain. It also questions God's word. You see, if there was any race of people in the whole world who ought to believe, who ought to be saved, who ought to be Christians, it were the Jews.

[5 : 09] Just have a look at how they described the rest of verse 4 and 5. Theirs, that is Israel, theirs is the adoption to sonship. Theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple, the promises.

Theirs are the patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. And from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah himself, who is God over all, forever praised.

Amen. Do you see who these Israelites are? They are the privileged people of God. Adopters as sons. Which is not about gender. It's about inheritance.

Because in the ancient world, who received the inheritance? The firstborn sons. Theirs is the law, the covenants, the temple. And when Jesus the Messiah came to earth, he did not come as an Aussie.

He came as an Israelite. And what's more, they had God's word, God's promises that said God would always be their God. And they would always be his people.

[6 : 14] And yet, when Jesus arrived, hardly any of them believed. And so, not many of them are saved. And so, either Paul's gospel is wrong, which many Jews still think today, or God's word to always be their God has failed.

Because not many believe, and therefore, according to Paul's gospel, not many are God's people anymore. It's this issue of Israel's salvation that Paul addresses over the next three chapters.

Chapter 9 tonight, 10, and 11. And so, if chapter 9 tonight is only the first part of the answer, and if you struggle with it, keep in mind there is more to come. But what is the first part of the answer to why not all Israel is saved?

Well, it's because not all Israel were chosen. Have a look at verse 6 and 7. It's not as though God's word had failed, says Paul.

Why? Well, 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.

[7 : 30] See, God's word to Israel has not failed, because God's word has said that not all Israelites, not all physically born Israelites, are actually spiritually God's people.

Spiritually Israelites. He said something earlier in Romans chapter 2 on the next slide. He said, a person is not a Jew if they are one only outwardly. I know a person is a Jew if they are one inwardly, spiritually.

He says the same thing in verse 7. Not all who are physically descended from Abraham are spiritually Abraham's children. It's a bit how like people think of Australia.

Often when people arrive in Australia, it doesn't matter where they're from, whether it's China or Iran or even Africa. I've heard people say that they thought everyone in Australia was a Christian.

They thought it was a Christian country. Have you ever heard people speak like that? I have. But we know not everyone in Australia is a Christian, are they? Sadly. It's the same thing with Israel.

[8 : 34] Just because you're physically born an Israelite in the line of Abraham doesn't automatically make you spiritually one of God's children. Any more than being born in Australia makes you a Christian.

And so what does make you one of God's children? Well, being chosen by God's word. See the rest of verse 7? 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, God's word, who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

For this was how the promise was stated. At the appointed time, I will return and Sarah will have a son. So remember, Abraham and Sarah, they desperately wanted children but could not have them.

Yet instead of trusting in God, Abraham slept with his maidservant Hagar and had a child called... Anyone remember? Ishmael. Yeah. And God said, why did you do that?

[9 : 42] That's not the child I have chosen for you. My word promised you a child from your own wife, Sarah, whose name is... Isaac.

Yeah. Thank you, all one of you. Yeah. Isaac. Yeah. That's whom God had chosen. And so Paul's point is that the true children of God are not those born of human decision like Ishmael, but those born of God's word or promise like Isaac.

Now, in case we're not convinced, Paul gives us a second example. This time, Isaac has grown up and he has kids of his own. Verse 10.

Not only that, but Rebecca, Isaac's wife, Rebecca's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet before the twins were born, who 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 Esau will serve the younger Jacob.

Just as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. And so here are two Israelites. And unlike Ishmael and Isaac, these two have the same mum, Rebecca.

[10 : 58] In fact, they are twins. And so at this stage, they have everything in common. But it says before they had done anything good or bad, God gave his word to Rebecca.

God said he had chosen the younger Jacob to be served by the older Esau. That is, Jacob would become one of his people, not Esau.

That language of love and hate is not about feelings. It's about being chosen or not chosen. And so notice two things here. First, in verse 11, this is in order that God's purpose in election might stand.

Yes, this is that P word. You know, the one we try and avoid at Bible studies, the predestination word. God did this to show that his purpose in election might stand, to show that it depends completely on his choice.

It's not as though God looked ahead and saw Jacob would be good and Esau would be bad. I mean, they both end up being terrible. They're both rotters.

[12 : 08] Jacob's name means grasping at the heel or deceiver. Now, God did this to show it depends on his sovereign choice as ruler of the world.

His election or selection of one over the other. But at the second notice also, it's a gracious choice of God. Because God knew neither deserved to be chosen.

And especially the younger one. I mean, not only was Jacob a rotter, he was also the younger. And remember, the inheritance in those days went to the older Esau.

But God deliberately chooses the younger Jacob, the least deserving one, to highlight his grace. You see, this is his sovereign choice, yes, but it's also a gracious choice.

But Paul's point here is that God's word has not failed. Because God's word always chose some, not all.

[13 : 13] So why are not all Israelites saved? Well, because God has only ever graciously chosen some, not all.

Just like God chose Isaac, not Ishmael. Jacob, not Esau. So he has chosen some Israelites, not all. Now, can I ask how you're feeling at the moment?

How do you feel when you hear that God chooses some to believe and not others? How do you feel when you hear that God selects or elects only some, but not all?

I'm guessing if you're anything like me, you'd be thinking, well, hang on a second. What about my choice to believe? Don't I have free will? Or you might be thinking, how is that fair?

How can God do that? Well, it seems Paul knows this because he goes on to address both those questions, beginning with how is that fair or just?

[14 : 13] At point three, verse 14. What then shall we say, is God unjust or unfair? 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.

It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For scripture says... Actually, I'll leave that bit. We'll just stop at verse 16 for a second.

Notice how Paul picks up the question in verse 14. Is God unjust or unfair? What's his answer? Not at all. No way, Jose.

Why? Why? Well, verse 15. For or because God will have mercy on whom he has mercy. In other words, God is saying, I'm God, and so I am allowed to choose whom I will have mercy on and whom I will have compassion on.

I'm allowed to choose some, not all. And if God is allowed to do this, then it is just. It is fair. He's allowed to. One of my favourite ice creams is on the next slide.

[15 : 26] It's the Cookies and Cream Connoisseur Ice Cream. We only ever get it when it's half price because it's ridiculously expensive. Even at half price, it's a bit over the top. Aldi has some really good ice cream at the moment.

But I digress. Anyway, my wife Michelle got it for me one night as a treat, but the kids saw. And so they asked if they could have some. When I said, well, I said no, because they'd had their dessert.

And then they complained, and so I put some in my mouth and went, mmm. Now, I guess the rubbing it in bit was a bit unfair. But am I not allowed to say no as the parent?

I'm talking to a bunch of kids here, aren't I? That's the wrong one. Why don't you become parents? They should be on the other foot.

You see, we are the parents. We set the rules. They answer to us, not the other way around. I mean, can you imagine if all parents answered to all kids all the time, even more than they do these days?

[16 : 34] In our house, we'd have McDonald's every night of the week for dinner, and none of the kids would go to school. We'd be the most unhealthy and uneducated family in all of Australia. And so having parents set the rules and them answering to us is actually good for the family.

And it's the same with God. God is God, and we are not. He sets the rules, and we answer to Him. And that is in everyone's best interests as well.

If everyone was God, then wouldn't our world be chaotic and in a mess? Can you imagine if your neighbours were God over you? Would that go down well? But because God is God, then He does have every right to choose.

For some to receive mercy, and not all. It is just. It is fair. What's more, mercy by its nature is not something we deserve.

That's why it's called mercy, right? So we cannot demand it for all people. We can only plead for it. And if we really want fairness or justice, then shouldn't that mean we all take the punishment for our own sins?

[17 : 53] Wouldn't that be fair? Just? Is God unjust? Not at all. The very fact that He gives mercy to anyone when everyone deserves judgment is extraordinarily gracious.

As Paul will hint at in verse 29, if God didn't graciously choose some Israelites, then there'd be none left because of their sin. But the point here is that because God is God, He has every right to give mercy to whomever He chooses.

And so verse 16, it does not depend on being part of the Jewish race, but on His grace, which God has every right to give to whomever He chooses.

In fact, if you've been struggling up until this point, hold on to your hats because it gets harder. Verse 17. For Scripture says to Pharaoh, I raise 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. See, God doesn't just get to choose who gets mercy, but also whom He will harden.

[19 : 15] And we saw that during our series on Exodus, where God hardened Pharaoh's heart. And do you notice why He did that in verse 17? So that He might display His power, and His name might be proclaimed.

He did it for Himself. Can you imagine? I mean, God hardened someone's heart just so that God would get glory. I mean, who does He think He is?

God or something? But that's the point, isn't it? So why aren't all Israel or all Melburnians saved? Well, because God did not choose all to receive mercy, which has always been the way.

It may seem unfair or unjust to us, but it's not. Because first, mercy cannot be demanded. Second, what is fair is we all pay for our own sins anyway.

But third, because God is God. So He has every right to give mercy to whomever He chooses. I mean, isn't that why we pray to God for people, and ask God to show them mercy, because we know He needs to intervene in their lives?

[20 : 32] And I guess that's the first application for us tonight. To pray for those we know who need to be saved. To plead with God to have mercy on them.

To soften their hearts and not harden them. I mean, we don't know whom God has chosen. That's not our job to know. Our job is to plead for God's mercy towards them.

Now, I know we can pray for people, and after a while nothing happens, and other things that demand our prayers come along, and so we kind of stop praying for them, and pray for these other things as well.

That's okay. It kind of goes in cycles like that, our prayer life. Until we're reminded again to pray for our non-Christian friends, and family. And so here is a reminder to pray for them again.

Because perhaps God has chosen them to become Christians later in life. Like a man called Ted. His wife, Jean, has been praying for him for over 60 years.

[21 : 35] And about a year and a half ago, someone from our nine o'clock congregation went across to this aged care home, shared the gospel with him, and Ted became a Christian. Just before his 100th birthday.

We had a plea with God to show mercy. But now there's another problem. Okay, all right God, it's not unfair, it's not unjust, you're allowed to do this.

But hang on a second. If you choose whom you'll save, and whom you'll harden, what about our choice? What about our free will?

And if God chooses who to harden, then how can God blame people when they don't believe? point four, verse 19. One of you will say to me, then why does God still blame us for who is able to resist his will?

You see, if no one is able to resist God's will to harden, then how can he blame people for not believing? That's what it's saying. And it seems like a reasonable question, doesn't it?

[22 : 44] But the thing is, God does give us a choice to believe or not. It's a real choice. We saw it in our first reading with Esau. Esau chose to give up his birthright, do you remember?

for a bowl of... Yeah, yum. Yes, God's word to Rebekah said this would happen, but Esau had a real choice and he despised his birthright.

He gave it up. And as we'll see next week, Israel chose not to believe too. So chapter nine tonight, God chooses who will believe and chapter 10 next week, people will choose if they believe.

Both are true. And both chapters run side by side in our Bibles, like two sides of the one coin. Chapter nine, 100% God's choice.

Chapter 10, 100% our choice. As I've said before, it's bad maths, but good theology. Of course, because it is bad maths, it doesn't make sense to us, does it?

[23 : 52] How can this work? How can it be 100% God's choice and 100% our choice? I don't get it. But it simply reminds us we're not God. And God has told us lots of things we can understand.

But there are just some things we don't. Like, how can Jesus be 100% God and we're not 100% human? Bad maths, good theology. We just don't understand. But I think this is good if we don't understand everything because it reminds us we're not God, are we?

We don't have the capacity to understand everything. If we understood everything God did, then either we'd be God or he'd be us and that's not a God I want to follow.

And so we can question and scratch our heads but we can't then shake our fist and say, God, you can't work like that.

That doesn't make sense to me. Verse 20, because who are you? A human being to talk back to God. Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it?

[25 : 01] Why did you make me like this? Doesn't the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use? God is the potter.

We are the clay. He has every right to choose and at the same time hold us accountable for our real choice. Even if we don't understand how it works.

Even if it doesn't make sense to us. As I've said, God has given us lots of evidence to believe but in some things we just have to trust him. As the Bible says, the secret things belong to the Lord our God.

And so the second application for us tonight is, will we humbly accept God as God or talk back to God as though he answers to us?

you know, tell him he can't work like this because it doesn't make sense to me or he can't do this because we don't think it's fair.

[26 : 03] I've heard people say, well that's not my God and they ignore that part of God's word. But you see, they are then determining how God should act, aren't they?

And you know what they've done, don't you? Now here's God, here's us and they've gone, no, no, God you can't do that. They've actually gone above God and told him how he can act and behave.

They've tried to become God themselves, that's sin. And so, the second application is that this chapter forces us to ask is, will we humbly accept God as God or will we talk back to him as though he answers to us?

And the third application is will we praise God for showing us mercy, for choosing us? You see, one reason God hardens some is so that we might recognize his great mercy to us, 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 bore with them to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory, that is, us, whom he has also called, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles?

[27 : 34] You see, because of sin we all deserve judgment and those who reject Christ, like many Israelites, are destined to receive it. Yet, instead of giving it to them now, God has waited with great patience.

Why? Well, it says to make known his mercy to others, like us Gentiles. to tell us about the riches of his glory that we'll share in.

You see, if God dished out judgment straight away on those who deserved it, and just left us in this room who received mercy, then we'd actually start to think it's normal to receive mercy.

That's just our right. Everyone here's got it. And we'd forget how blessed we are to receive it. But God patiently bears with those destined for judgment so that we might recognize God's mercy to us and humbly praise him for it.

Let me finish with a story. You kind of see this every time you go to a non-Christian funeral. I remember one that I conducted where the husband was not a Christian and we're at the crematorium.

[28 : 42] We had the service at the church and then we went out to, I think it was Sprigvale crematorium. And we're in the little chapel there that they call it. And what happens is the coffin is placed at the front of the room and at the end of the little service the curtain closes around the coffin so the people in the room can't see it and then the crematorium workers take the coffin away to cremate it, to burn it.

We came to the end of the service. He wasn't a Christian and when the time came for me to close the curtain he jumped out of his seat, ran up to the coffin and flung himself on the coffin of his deceased wife because he could not let her go.

He had no hope of seeing her again, this was it. And he just sobbed on top of the coffin as the curtain kind of closed on him.

And my heart broke for him. That's why I tried to share with him the good news of Jesus leading up to the funeral. But he didn't want to borrow it.

The only reason he had the funeral in the church was to keep his in-laws happy. He didn't want to borrow it. And as my heart broke for this man who sobbed with no hope, my heart not only broke but it also was humbled that God has given me hope.

[30 : 04] God has had mercy on me. And I praised him for it. As that famous line goes, but for the grace of God, there go I.

I was that man but for God's mercy to me. So pray for the lost, accept God as God, and recognize God's mercy to us, that our hearts might be filled with humble praise for him, and continue to sing with joy.

My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing, even choosing to show mercy, he cannot do. Let's pray.

Our gracious heavenly father, we thank you for even this difficult chapter in your word that reminds us that we are not God but you are. Help us to understand the things we can understand, and to accept the things we can't.

Help us humbly to accept you as God, remembering we are not, and help us to recognize the extraordinary mercy that you've had on us, that we might humbly praise the one who saved us.

[31 : 34] We ask it in his name. Amen.