

The Choice of God

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, I wonder if you might join with me in prayer. Let's pray. Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for your word, who is the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for your word, which is the word of the gospel. We thank you for your word, which is contained for us in scripture.

And Father, we pray today that you would help us to understand it and understanding it, help us to live in the light of it. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Well, friends, just give me a moment. I got caught on the hop there saying hello to some friends and I'll just log into my computer. So you'll be right. While we're doing that, I want you to imagine for a moment that I've got a couple of friends here.

They are ex-members of our congregation or in fact, one's a sort of current member of our congregation. One another is an ex-member of our congregation. I want you to, I won't name their names, but I want you to imagine they're sitting in the front pew here.

[1 : 18] We'll call them John and George. Okay. And I want to tell you something about John and George. John and George are both Jews and are both Christians.

Okay. So both Jews, both Christians. And it's very important for you to understand that in order to understand, I want to use them as object lessons for what we are going to do today.

Okay.

he included a request, which was this. Andrew, I've been asked to prepare a seminar at a local Bible college on the question of Israel. Now, basically, I think I'm the fall guy.

Crazily, this issue is the most talked about topic in Christian churches here in this country. Every church that I have spoken at has contained someone who's come and spoken to me about the question of Israel. I just wanted to ask if you knew a good resource to help me prepare.

[2 : 32] Friends, as it turns out, this Andrew, who was a member of our congregation, was very interested in this topic and I was able to send my... Sorry, this is John. I was able to send my friend to so that they could ask the question. But I wonder if this issue of Israel is an issue for you. Is it a matter for your friends, your Christian friends in particular? Is it something that you have thought about at all? Let me tell you that it was a matter of great significance for Paul. In fact, if you were to read Paul's letters, it comes up again and again in his letters, often in a way that we don't recognize because we did not live in the first century and can't really understand what is going on behind the scenes. But it comes to the fore in the three chapters that we are going to look at today. Romans chapter 9 through to 11. Now, in our series of Romans, we have come a long way. We have surveyed some of the trickiest aspects of Paul's theology.

We've summarized his arguments that people have spent many years, many centuries dissecting and arguing about. And today, we're going to be even more ambitious. You see, today, we're going to cover three chapters. And in order to help you, I've simplified, perhaps some might think, oversimplified those chapters into a series of six or seven diagrams. Romans 9 to 11 in Venn diagrams. This is for you.

So hang on in there and you'll see how we go. I hope you'll find it a helpful way of understanding the passages. I hope that afterwards, you will go and read the passages again and see if you can understand them in the light of these diagrams. Now, I think if you've read Romans 1 to 8, you'll find some massive questions that hang over everything that Paul has said. You see, I think that Paul knows that if you listen to him in Romans 1 to 8, then you will have very deep questions. And I think that these chapters 9 to 11 answer the most prominent questions that you will have in your brain, particularly if you are a Jew or a Gentile in the first century. So let's have a look at each one of the questions in order. Now, in Romans 1 verse 16, Paul said that the gospel that he preached was first for the Jew and then for the Gentile. First for the Jew and then for the Gentile. But if you listen very carefully to Paul from Romans 1 on, you will find that he gives the impression that Jews are not very special at all. So the question that is needed to be answered right up the front is this. Is there any benefit any longer in being a Jew? Are Jews special in any way now as far as God is concerned?

That brings us to question 2. You see, in Romans 8, Paul said that God was the faithful God. He is a God who brings Christian people safely to their eternal inheritance. Nothing can separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus their Lord. But if we are to believe that God is a faithful God, that he is faithful to his Christian people, that we must be able to demonstrate that he's been faithful to his promises to Abraham. Because it's, in other words, there are huge doubts hanging over his faithfulness to Christians if he cannot be faithful to his Jewish people. Does that make sense? So is God faithful?

So the question is, is he faithful? Has he been faithful to Jews? Has he in fact in history demonstrated his faithfulness? Have we got any guarantees that he'll be faithful to us as Christians?

[6 : 34] Question 3. You see, Paul has clearly said in a number of places that he is God's special man. He's been appointed by God for a special task. He's been chosen by God. He's been sent by God to Gentiles. And many Gentiles in the first century were becoming Christians. In fact, many more Gentiles than Jews were becoming Christians.

So the question is, has God now forgotten the Jews? Has he moved on? Has he forgotten his special people, the descendants of Abraham, according to the flesh? And is he now committed to Gentiles and not Jews?

In my view, those are the questions that sit behind Romans 9 to 11. And these chapters are Paul's answers to those questions. They are his primary concern. So let's see how he goes about addressing it. And I need to start by showing you the very first diagram. So have a look at this diagram. This is how you, if you were a Jew, so this is how, what do I call them? John and George, right? Not Andrew, John and George. This is how John and George, if they were Christians in the first century, this is how they would have viewed the world. There is all humanity. And within that, a subset of Israel. So you get Israel are insiders. They are the people who know God, who belong to God, who are God's special people. Everyone outside is Gentile and they have no access to God.

So that's how a good Jew in the first century would have sort of viewed the world. Now, the first thing that Paul does is to introduce his subject in your Bibles, have a look at, or in your outlines, Romans 9, 1 to 5, Romans 9, 1 to 5.

I speak the truth in Christ. Paul says, I am not lying. My conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit. I have great sorrow and an unceasing anguish in my heart for I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race.

[8 : 42] The people of Israel, theirs is the adoption to sonship. Theirs is the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs. From them is traced human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised. Amen. Now, I want you to notice what Paul is saying.

He is starting off everything he is about to say by assuring his readers of his own convictions. He is saying this, Jews are God's special people. Jews are people to whom God has promised so much.

They are the people through whom God's purposes are being worked out. They are important to God. And I, Paul, do care about Jews. I care about them more than anyone knows.

If it were possible before God to be cast off from God so that my brethren, the Jews, might be brought in, I would do it. And then in verse 6, 6 to 13, his argument begins in earnest.

And the very first thing he does is to ask whether God's word or promise to Abraham has failed. And he is unequivocal. Let me see if I can summarize it. I'm going to sort of paraphrase what he says.

[10 : 05] I think it goes something like this. God's word has not failed. The state of things now is no different to the state you have always seen.

There is, that is, there are many different levels of God's elective purposes. There are many different ways you can think about Israel. You see, throughout Israelite history, not everyone who was physically descended from Israel was truly Israel.

That was even true in the second generation of Israelites. That is, those, the second generation after Abraham himself. Think about it for a moment. See, think about Jacob and Esau, his brother.

Both Jacob and Esau were descendants of Abraham. However, Jacob was not just a physical descendant. He was also a spiritual descendant of Abraham.

He was the one to whom God gave the promises. He was, if you like, the child of promise. Now, whatever you see with Jacob and Esau is true even in the first century now.

[11 : 20] You see, there are Jews today in the first century who are physical descendants. But there are also Jews who are spiritual descendants. So, Jews who are physical descendants, Jews who are spiritual descendants.

Think of my two friends here. Members of our congregation, John and George. One, both of them, are spiritual descendants. But let me tell you about one of them.

We'll call him George. George was brought up in synagogue. George was brought up in Judaism. He was a true Jew.

And then he became a Christian. So, he was physically descended from Abraham. And then there came a time in his life when he became a spiritual descendant, as it were, of Abraham as well.

So, let's just see if we can summarize this in our second diagram. So, can you see the second diagram? What is happening there is that there is, even within Jewish history, before we get to Christian faith, there is all humanity.

[12 : 31] Then there is Israel, the physical descendants. And then there are Israel, that is, the chosen ones. That is, the descendants.

Not only the physical descendants, but the spiritual descendants of Abraham. So, let's move on now, and I'll just find my place here.

So, let's accept what Paul says for a moment. And let's accept that this is what has always happened. When you look through history, you have always found situations like this.

That is a true Israel within Israel. If this is God's way of doing things, what's the question that's going to come up in your brains? The question is, is God unjust to choose a Jacob over an Esau?

Is God unjust in this? Maybe God's ways are unjust. If God chooses some and rejects others without any reference to anything they do, then maybe the charge could be charged against God of being unjust.

[13 : 40] And that is exactly what verses 14 to 29 are about. They address the charge that God could be seen as unjust. And I want to paraphrase what Paul says like this. It goes something like this.

Look, the God of Israel is first and foremost a God of mercy. His selection of Israel was always an act of mercy. And any resistance to God's purposes is also the result of his action and part of his merciful response.

That makes God seem unfair. It makes him seem to be a puppeteer of human beings. But let's get things straight. After all, we are not God.

We are creatures, not the creator. And who are we to question our creator? Then verse 22, Paul puts forward an alternative view, a sort of what if.

And he says something like this. Let's stop arguing about God for a moment and consider another possible explanation as to what God is doing in his world. You see, God is a judge and he's rightfully angry with his creation.

[14 : 42] But God withholds judgment. And he does so in order to make himself known to his objects of mercy. And the objects of his mercy are not just from Jews.

They are from Gentiles as well. They are from the whole world, Jew and Gentile alike. And he's done this just as he prophesied he would. He has called people from all nations, Jew and Gentile alike.

And he has prophesied in Hosea that I will call them my people who were not my people. And I will call her my loved one who is not my loved one. So what Paul is doing is he's sort of saying another way of viewing all of this is to view it like this next diagram.

So I wonder if I could have the next diagram. He's saying, look, you need to revise your diagram. Move that little yellow circle aside a little so that it overlaps both Gentiles and Jews.

So true Israel is partly like John and George. Jews physically, but descendants spiritually of God, of Abraham as well.

[15 : 50] People of faith like Abraham. But also there are people who are among the Gentiles who are descended from Abraham as well. Who are true believers just like Abraham.

Can you see what's happened? He's gone through a slight change in his diagram. And then what Paul does is spend 15 verses talking about who's in the big circle and who's in the small circle. If you like the colors, who's in the red circle, who's in the yellow circle.

And basically he says the people in the yellow circle are those who see things correctly. The people who are in that larger red circle are those who see things incorrectly.

And even perhaps in the blue square. Let's have a look at each of them in turn. First of all, let's turn to our little circle. So the next diagram, please. So you can see there those people who are in that circle, that little circle are those who see things correctly.

That is, they see that they're out of relationship with God. That they cannot do anything of their own to get back into relationship with God. They see that Christ alone is obedient and righteous.

[17 : 00] They accept Christ and what he's done on their behalf. These people consist of both groupings, Jews and Gentiles alike. So I, Andrew, am in that circle.

And my friends, George and John, are also in that circle. The difference is I'm in that lower half of true Israel.

They are in that upper half of true Israel. They are Jews and part of true Israel. I'm a Gentile and part of true Israel. And we're both there on the same grounds.

Or all three of us there on the same grounds. Our faith in Jesus Christ. Now, have a look at the next diagram. It shows the other side of the coin. These people are very different.

They see that salvation and righteousness are a matter of doing things. That is, they think that righteousness comes by law. Some would even say that righteousness comes by being descended from Abraham.

[17 : 59] And these people are very wrong, says Paul. They are undoubtedly zealous. They are undoubtedly well-intentioned. But they are undoubtedly wrong. And I want you to have a look at Romans 10, verses 2 to 4.

Romans 10, 2 to 4. Paul says, For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God. But their zeal is not based on knowledge.

Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone, Jew or Gentile alike, who believes.

Now, verses 14 to 21 are where Paul addresses the issue of why Israel hasn't responded to the gospel to the extent that might have been expected. His point is that to respond, you need to hear.

To hear, you need preachers. To have preachers, you need God to commission and send preachers. And they've had all of this. In fact, by the time Paul writes, they've had 20 plus years of gospel preaching.

[19 : 12] But they've still not repented. Jews are still not turning to Christ en masse. And this was not unexpected because Isaiah had prophesied that this would be the case.

In Isaiah, God had said, you can see this in verse 21, All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people. Now, let's now turn to chapter 11.

And Paul pushes on with his argument. He imagines that his readers have accepted everything he said up to this point. And he imagines a question put back to him. And the question might go something like this.

Okay, Paul, so Israel has rejected the gospel largely. Well, surely Israel's rejection of the gospel means that God has rejected his people.

After all, he has not rejected. If he had not rejected his people, then he would have brought them to believe the gospel, wouldn't he? And again, Paul's unequivocal and clear.

[20 : 13] He says, may it never be. There is no way such an assertion can be true. Elijah was an example of such a remnant as this in his time.

So when there were no Christians, we even find there was a remnant within Israel. And Jews who believe in Jesus now are a remnant in their time. So look at the next diagram.

Can you see what Paul's saying? He's saying those group of people, the Pauls of this world, the Jewish Christians, the John and the George, they are a remnant of Israel.

Believers in the Lord Jesus within Israel itself. So that's our next diagram. And after having said this, Paul presses on again, and he talks about others in the nation of Israel.

And he tells us that they are hardened in their heart like Pharaoh of Egypt. And he makes the point this has been the way it has been throughout Jewish history. Look at verse 8 of chapter 11.

[21 : 11] In other words, he's saying this has been true throughout Israel's history.

There have been hard-hearted Jews, and that has come from God. And then in verses 11 to 24, he makes the point that these harsh quotations are not God's last word concerning Israel.

What Paul is saying in these verses is something like this. You see, friends, even now, there is a remnant of people who see things the correct way. There are the Pauls, the Jameses, the Johns, the Georges, and so on.

They see things correctly. There is a remnant that is very small at the moment. But God has in view something much greater than this.

You see, God's view is that the salvation of Gentiles will make Jews envious. And that envy will eventually bring about the restoration of the whole of the remnant.

[22 : 17] And then all Israel, both Jew and Gentile alike, will be saved. Look at what he says. Look at verses 25 to 27. I don't want you to be ignorant of this mystery, Paul says, so that you may not be conceited.

He's talking to Gentiles, remember. Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way, all Israel will be saved.

As it is written, the deliverer will come from Zion. He will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins. And that can be represented by the next diagram.

Can you see it? Can you see what Paul is saying? He's saying he envisages a time when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, when there will be people from Israel who will want to be in true Israel by believing in Jesus.

And that represents Paul is one of those himself. And he wonders whether at the end of time, there will be a fullness of them. And what Paul is saying is, this is why I preach to Gentiles. Now, here's a very convoluted piece of logic.

[23 : 23] See if you can grab it. You see, he says, at the moment, God is concentrating on Gentiles. We can see that, can't we? God is concentrating on Gentiles. Most of us here are Gentiles.

If John and George were here, they would be exceptions. But most of us here are Gentiles. And there's a certain number of Gentiles who will be converted.

In the eyes of God. So the sooner that number of Gentiles is filled up, then the sooner it will be the turn of Jews. And therefore, Paul says, that's why I preach so hard to Gentiles.

So to fill up their number so that Jews might begin to enter in full numbers as well. And that brings us to the last few verses. These verses represent, I think, a summary of the epistles so far.

Take a look at them. Look at Romans 11.32. Paul says, For God has bound everyone over to disobedience, that he might have mercy on them all.

[24 : 23] Can you hear what Paul is saying? He's saying humanity was bound over to disobedience. Why? So that God could be merciful. It is clear, isn't it? God has handed humans over to their own desires and passions.

He's consigned them to their own disobedience. If you want to hear that, read Romans 1. And God's purpose in that is to justify the ungodly. That he might have mercy on all.

Paul's point is critically important. He's telling us that God has confined us human beings to disobedience. Only so that he might be merciful to them.

Humans cannot receive mercy as long as they rely on anyone or anything other than him. Therefore, to consign people to their own disobedience is to bring home to them their creatureliness and their need for God.

And that opens the opportunity for God to be merciful to them. And that is so whether you are a Jew or a Gentile. So, what is the theme that the book of Romans began with?

[25 : 31] It began with an explanation as to how humans are in rebellion against God, Jew and Gentile alike. And it ends with a note, or this part of it ends with a note, about God's mercy being extended to everyone.

To all rebels against God. If all humans are consigned to the sort of disobedience displayed in Romans 1 to 3, it is only that they might benefit from the mercy of God, as in Romans 3, 21 to 26.

This is God's purpose. Mercy. And so it is that Paul ends his explanation in Romans 11 with this praise of God. Look at it in verses 33 on.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments. And his paths are beyond tracing out.

Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should ever repay him? Or that God should ever repay them?

[26 : 38] For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. Can you see that? If everyone has been consigned to disobedience, then there is only one way to come to God, isn't there?

There's only one way to come to God, and that is through his means, displayed in the mercy of the cross, through his Son, Jesus Christ. Whatever God has given to you is a gift.

From God, through God, for God, are all things. So at the end of the day, glory can only be given to him. Friends, if you are sitting here today, whether you are John, George, Andrew, or any of you, if you are sitting here today, as a believer in Jesus Christ, it is only because of God's activity.

It is only because he has been at work in you, and in his Son, to bring you to him. And the only proper response is for you to fall on your knees, and say, from him, and through him, and to him, and for him are all things, and to him be the glory forever.

Amen. Amen. It's sobering, isn't it? You see, if you were to ask Paul, what turns him on? What makes him excited? What makes him break into praise, as he does here?

[28 : 13] The answer is clear. Paul gets a buzz from God, and his purposes, and God's extreme mercy. That's what excites him. That's what turns him on.

That's what, he's turned on by what God has done, and what God is doing, and that all is from God. What God will do.

Paul is so God-centered, that is just awesome. He is God-focused, and it is this focus, that we can learn from, as we hear Paul.

We need to focus on God, and his purposes, and his initiative, and find pleasure in these things. We need to relearn how to find joy, and enthusiasm in God.

To get excited about his great plans, particularly as they find their focus, in Jesus Christ. To be filled with joy, about what he has done.

[29 : 15] What he is doing now, and what he will do in the future. Let's learn how to be, to join with Paul, as we reflect on God, as we echo his words, O the depth of the riches, of the wisdom, and knowledge of God.

How unsearchable, are his judgments. His paths, are beyond tracing out. Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?

For from God, and through God, and for God, are all things. To him be glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Let's pray. O Father, how deep are the riches, of the wisdom, and knowledge of you.

How unsearchable, are your judgments, and your paths, are beyond us, tracing out. who has known your mind, who has been your counselor, who has ever given to you, that you should repay them.

[30 : 35] Father, we know we have not. We know that all things are from you, and through you, and for you. And so to you, we give glory, and we praise you, and we exalt in you.

To you be glory forever. Amen.