

God's Sovereignty

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 July 2022

Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 0 0] imagine there are five people who are planning to hold up a bank. All of these five people are friends of mine. I find out about it, and so I just beg with them not to do with it.

I plead with them, don't go ahead with this. I try to block them from doing it, and they push me out of the way and go on their course.

On the way to the bank, I managed to catch up with the group, and just before they're moving in to rob the bank, I tackled one of my friends to the ground, and I wrestled with them on the ground, and I managed to convince them in the process of doing that, this is not the right course of action.

Come back with me. And they stop, and they come back with me. The other four continue on. They rob the bank. A guard and a bank employee are killed in the process.

All four are soon caught. They're convicted. They're sentenced, never to be released. The one I tackled goes free.

[1 : 1 9] Two questions. Whose fault is it that the four are in prison for the rest of their life? Secondly, can the one that I tackled go about the rest of their life saying, I am free because I'm such a great, moral, upstanding citizen?

The only reason they're free is because I restrained them. I tackled them. Such is the triumph of God's grace towards us sinners through Jesus Christ, as it's been unfolded before us in the book of Romans.

The triumph of God's grace, as we've seen in Romans 1 to 8, radically changes everything for us. Being made right, just, justified by Jesus Christ means that we now enjoy peace with God, access to God, and even joy in the midst of hardships and difficulties and trials in life.

And as we saw last week, as Aidan brought the end of Romans 8 to us, it ends with this great climax of confidence that nothing can possibly separate us from God's loving Jesus Christ.

God himself guarantees, sovereignly guarantees, our final perseverance because our salvation is not based on our moral goodness.

[2 : 5 6] It's not based on our will. It's not based on the strength of our character at all. God has called us, opened our minds to this truth.

He's tackled us, and now he carries us to final glory. And so, imagine we're in Rome, and we receive this letter from the Apostle Paul, there's a church in Rome, Jews and Gentiles are in here.

And as this is being read out to the church in Rome, the Jewish group are going, hang on a bit, Paul.

Wait a minute. You've just ended chapter 8 here with this great climax of God's sovereign purposes not failing. You say God will, those who saves, he will bring them all the way home to himself.

What about our people? What about the Jews? God called them out of Egypt. But most of our people to this day have in fact rejected their God.

[4 : 16] So maybe God's calling and purpose can in fact be rejected. If God promised to Israel that they would be his people, and yet the majority of them don't in fact believe in Christ, does that mean that God's promise, his power, his mercy can in fact fail?

That is, will what you've just said, Paul, in Romans 8, stand? Will it stand?

Will the blood-bought promises that we Gentiles and Jews are staking our lives on here, Paul, will they stand? Will God stand by his commitments, filled with the blood of his son?

Will he work all things together for our good? Will the predestined be called, be justified, those who are justified in fact be glorified?

Will he give us all things in him? Will nothing separate us from the love of Christ, in love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord? Is there truly now no condemnation?

[5 : 31] And will there be no condemnation tomorrow? Because look at God's historic people in Israel. Romans 9, which Gary's just read to us, is, and you can see why he mentions, there's so many references to the Old Testament, because that's what we're dealing with, is God's historic people now.

Romans 9 is an explanation for why the word of God has not failed. Even though God's chosen people, his historic people, Israel, are now not turning to Jesus and being saved.

The sovereignty of God's grace is brought in as the final ground of God's faithfulness, despite Israel's failure, and therefore as the deepest foundation of the precious promises of God in Romans chapter 8.

This is the deepest foundation, God's sovereign purposes. So I've got three points today. Israel's failure, did God fail, and God's sovereignty and our failure.

So first of all, Israel's failure. Now, Paul is here dealing with a subject not only of intellectual importance, but of great emotional importance to him as well.

[7 : 11] Can I just add this point? I think this is a very significant point. This is one of the most overlooked thing about Romans chapter 9. Romans chapter 9 to 11 have been debated for centuries.

And they are very difficult chapters. But the most striking thing about Romans chapter 9 is verses 2 and 3.

That is staggering.

It is staggering. What he has just written there. Absolutely staggering. He has just spent eight chapters outlining the joy, the hope, the confidence of everything that he has and you can have in Jesus Christ.

He knows the horror of rejecting Jesus. And he is saying that he would give it all up.

[8 : 32] All the benefits of Romans 1 to 8. All the benefits of knowing Jesus Christ if that somehow it meant that his own fellow Jews would be saved in mass.

I had to stop there in my preparation.

Because I can't say that. I can't say that. Here is a love for people that is incomprehensibly staggering in the Apostle Paul.

We also see it in the Old Testament in Exodus with Moses. It is a great reminder as we jump into Romans 9 to 11 that Paul, while incredibly logical, was never cold.

Never cold in his emotions. He feels the unceasing anguish of knowing that his people that he loves have rejected their Savior.

[10 : 01] And instead of seeking to ignore it, instead of seeking to alter his theology to deal with that, he lived with it.

He lived with it. And so if the next three chapters pose an intellectual or a moral challenge for you, it is important to remember that Paul is not writing from some kind of ivory theological tower out of a college somewhere.

This is not a lecture. This is Paul with a heart that longed to see his own people saved. It is, however, a salvation that was just as open to them as it was to the Apostle Paul.

His own people have had the exact same opportunity that he has to receive Christ, but they have rejected this salvation. And in verses 4 and 5, there are eight privileges that have effectively been rejected.

And each one of these privileges pointed Israel forward, forward, forward to Jesus as their Messiah. The adoption of sons, which refers to Exodus 4 verse 22, where Israel is called God's son.

[11 : 18] Jesus taught that through him we can now approach God as father. The divine glory refers to God's visible glory cloud dwelling amongst his people.

John chapter 1 verse 14 tells us, And it says in John 1 verse 14, We have seen his glory.

Same as Moses and Israel in Exodus. The covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, the promises, the patriarchs, all pointing forward to the Messiah.

And lastly, Paul says, From them is traced the human ancestry of Christ. That is, it is obvious, but often overlooked, that Jesus was himself a Jew.

By God choosing to enter his creation as a Jew, he not only was giving the Jewish nation an incredible honour, but was in fact making it easier for them to relate to the Son of God than anyone else in the world.

[12 : 39] And so with all these privileges and opportunities, why is it that God's historic people have not recognised their often promised and long-awaited Messiah?

That brings me to verse 6 and my next point, Did God in fact fail his people? And this is the bulk of Paul's argument in Romans 9.

In 6 to 13, Paul firstly makes the point that God's promises have not failed. That is, God's word to his people, his promise to his people has not failed.

And to clarify that point, he says in verse 6, Not all who are descendant from Israel are Israel.

What he means there is that not everyone who is racially God's historic people are truly God's historic people.

[13 : 41] In other words, it is so essential as we come into this argument here, that we define Israel properly to see that God's promises have in fact not failed.

Some who are racially descendant from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not God's true people. And others who are not racially descendant from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are in fact God's true people.

And Paul, to build on this, gives two Old Testament examples. He's calling his people here to look at God's promises just a little bit more closely.

He says, Ishmael was Abraham's physical descendant.

But he was not Abraham's spiritual descendant. Only Isaac was a child of the promise and inheritor of the blessings from God.

[15 : 12] And the same principle is there in verse 10 with Isaac's twin sons. They had the same father, both physically descendant, ultimately from Abraham.

But only one is the spiritual descendant and inheritor of the promise. What Paul's doing here in this section is tackling the really thorny question of why anyone loves God.

And why anyone does not love God. It's an answer that is hard to avoid and even harder to accept.

In verse 11, he tells us that God's choice to bless Jacob and not Esau was made prior to their birth.

Secondly, this choice was not based on foreknowledge of how the child would turn out in life.

[16 : 24] It was made before either child had done anything good or bad. Verse 11 reinforces the point of God's sovereign choice by adding in order that God's purpose in election might stand.

Verse 12 further reinforces this point by telling us that blessing from God does not come by works, but by him who calls.

And for good measure, in verse 13, Paul adds a paraphrase of Malachi chapter 1 verses 2 and 3, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.

Now, we've got to be careful here not to read into the word hate, some sort of an emotional thing that we might add to it.

Paul's teaching here is very similar to what Jesus says in Luke 14 about his disciples hating their families, about the cost of discipleship, if you like. He's not saying that you must have a strong emotion against your family as much as he's saying that there is a preference and allegiance to Jesus over everything else.

[17 : 41] That's his point. It's an allegiance question. God chose to put Jacob over Esau. But not because Jacob was morally superior to Esau.

Just read the Old Testament and you will see that clearly, that Jacob is in no way morally superior to Esau. It was by God's gracious choice.

Paul's defense of God's promises in the Old Testament is pretty straightforward. Those promises were never automatically given to the physical descendant of Abraham.

A spiritual faith was necessary to inherit the promise. In other words, what he's saying here is that God's promise to his people, his word to his people has not failed at all in any way.

It's been misunderstood. It's been misunderstood by his people. He also asserts that this necessary spiritual faith is ultimately a function of God's choice.

[19 : 03] Those who freely come to God are those who are freely chosen by God. As I said, this teaching is not hard to understand, but it isn't easy to accept.

One initial response that many people have is an emotional response, and it is that God's electing choice seems arbitrary, random.

And especially when you look at the Old Testament, you look at Jacob and you go, why him? But Paul does not say here that God has no reasons to choose who he chooses.

All we are told is that the reason for his choosing has nothing to do with the individual. That's all we're told.

Has nothing to do with the individual. God has every reason to choose who he chooses. We're just not told why it is.

[20 : 20] But we do know it has nothing to do with the individual. There is no superiority of one individual over another.

Nevertheless, this raises a second question of whether God had failed Israel. Have a look at verse 14. What then shall we say to this then?

Is God unjust? Paul says, no, not at all. In other words, if God's the one who does the choosing, then why doesn't he choose everyone, all of Israel?

In verses 15 and 18, Paul again turns the Old Testament to form his answer. In Exodus 33, Moses asked God to show him his glory and not to depart Israel despite Israel rejecting God consistently.

God's response to Moses is in verses 18 to 19. And he says, I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence.

[21 : 30] I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. God's words to Moses here are not the words of some arbitrary bully. You see, mercy and compassion by their very definition can never, ever be an obligation. To say it is unfair for God to have mercy on some and not others is in itself a self-contradictory statement.

The moment we declare mercy to be unfair is the moment mercy becomes an obligation.

And therefore, it's no longer mercy. And none of us wants that. If you look at the rest of Romans, no one wants mercy to be an obligation.

[22 : 45] Mercy is always undeserved and totally free. God is free to give it to all. He's totally free to give it to some.

And he's totally free to give it to no one. He's free. For instance, imagine a rich person deciding to choose 20 homeless children.

and gifting them with a home to live in and, you know, cupboards full of food, clothes on their backs, full education, a job in their companies.

That rich person could do the same thing for many more than 20 children, but they choose 20 children. That's it. Does anyone have the right to say that that rich person is being unfair by not helping all the homeless children?

In the end, that person has no obligation to help any of them. their action to those 20 is sheer mercy.

[24 : 08] And there is, can be no suggestion of it being unfair to all the rest. See, the early chapters of Romans tell us that no human being can have any claim at all on God's mercy.

And if they did have a claim on it, it can no longer be called mercy. And since Romans 6 tells us the wages of sin is death, then the real shock, the real shock of Romans 9 is that God would extend his mercy to anyone.

Anyone. Not everyone. Paul then expands on this point of whether God is unfair by turning to the example now of Pharaoh in verses 17 and 18.

and this builds on the early chapters of Romans. He comes to this same issue of God's fairness but now from the opposite direction. This is the Egyptian leader who enslaved God's people who anyone set up against him as you see in those early chapters of Exodus.

He kills them. and he did that because he decided that he would do it.

[25 : 51] And in verse 17 Paul is quoting from Exodus 9 16. I have raised you up for this very purpose that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

God has compassion and he wants to have compassion and hardens those whom he wants to harden. Again these are hard verses but they make a lot of sense. If you go back and you read Exodus 4 to 14 you will notice two things that's happening at the same time in those chapters.

God hardens Pharaoh's heart to fulfill his plans and Pharaoh at the same time hardens his own heart. Pharaoh sets himself up against God and against God's people.

In other words Pharaoh is not an upstanding moral man that God comes along and hardens his heart so that he becomes cold and evil.

That's not what's happening in Exodus 4 to 14. Somehow both God hardening and Pharaoh hardening are both true at exactly the same time.

[27 : 13] God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart is God giving Pharaoh over to what Pharaoh has already chosen to do.

And we see that in Romans chapter 1. Pharaoh decides to resist God and God reinforces that position for Pharaoh.

God gives Pharaoh what he has already chosen. God's plans work through our choices not despite our choices.

This is crucial. that is we ought not take God's sovereignty as something like fatalism.

The biblical version here the Greek notion of fate the Islamic notion of kismet are quite radically different than the Christian teaching of God's sovereignty.

[28 : 20] in the tragic Greek myth of Oedipus he was fated to kill his mother and sorry kill his father and marry his mother.

And he and his parents did absolutely everything that they possibly could to avoid that fate. And yet despite their working against it it happened.

And it's basically exactly the same as the Islamic kismet. It's fate. It's destiny. It doesn't matter what I do. It's the will of Allah. It doesn't matter what I do.

That's not the Christian teaching of God's sovereignty. For the Christian God never forces us to do anything other than what we already want to do.

God works his purposes and plans perfectly through our actions. And that's a mystery.

[29 : 31] I can't tell you how he does that. It's a mystery. And yet it is both a beautiful and comforting mystery. It's comforting because either we are determined in our world by natural forces such as fatalism and kismet or they happen randomly.

All the actions and events in our world are just random events and we are at the mercy of the elements. It's either fated or in a secular world it's just random.

Or of course there's the biblical doctrine of certainty. we make choices under the sovereign hand of a merciful God. God chooses those he hardens but all he hardens want to be hardened.

Paul then makes a third case for why God is not unfair to have mercy on some and not others. This is a section really from 19 to 29 really makes one point and that is God is just supremely right and for us little autonomous kings we really struggle with this little bit.

The first thing he says in verses 20 to 21 is that God makes us and has the right of ownership as the creator of us all. We are so far below God that we neither have the right nor the wisdom to question our creator.

[31 : 10] And so we must be really careful beware of standing in judgment of God. Beware of standing in judgment of God and beware of forgetting that he is in fact judge over us.

In verse 21 it says he is the divine potter we are the clay. The second thing he says is that we are the authors of our own damnation. Notice verse 22 God bore with great patience the objects of his wrath prepared for destruction.

Now that's verse 22 but compare verse 22 what it says there with verse 23 where we are told that the objects of God's mercy are prepared in advance for glory by God.

That is what is explicit in verse 23 is that it is God who does the preparing and yet in verse 22 we are not told who does the preparing and the implication is that the vessels of wrath are prepared for destruction by themselves.

That is what we saw in chapter one of Romans where God hands people over to the life and the death that they have chosen for themselves.

[32 : 52] And then the last point he makes in this section is that God saves some and not others because in his divine wisdom it displays his glory more than any other way.

If God had mercy on all or if God condemned all then we would not see God as majestic and glorious.

again at its heart this is a mystery and this mystery may seem strange to us but that's the point of this section we're not God we don't have all the clues all the facts we cannot know everything or decide what is best for the whole course of human history my goodness we can't even decide what's best for dinner sometimes but these words ultimately are words of comfort clarity and comfort and so the final point not just Israel's failure but our failure and God's sovereignty God's sovereign election is marvelously practical and it's profoundly comforting for the Christian right now it's simply I think builds on the hope of

Romans 8 that was outlined for us last week by Aiden it means that we have an incredible incentive to use our wisdom and our will and our efforts to the best effect we're not robots to use to use to use it to the best effect knowing that God and knowing that we will suffer consequences from foolishness and wickedness at the same time there's an absolute promise that we cannot ultimately mess up our lives even our failures and our troubles will be used for God's glory and our benefit I gotta tell you as someone who regularly fails that is profoundly comforting profoundly comforting the promise of God to his children in Romans 8 28 is that he works for the good of those who love him it is a guarantee to those who are adopted into God's family through faith in Jesus

Christ as saviour and if you are not in his family if you are not in his family if you have not come and embrace Jesus Christ as your Lord and saviour then know this even the good things in your life will ultimately not turn out for your good they will most likely harden you to make you proud or to make you comfortable or to make you blind to your need and your dependence upon Jesus Christ as your saviour the other marvellous thing about God's sovereign election is that his electing love is ultimate love if God loves us before he found something good in us sorry if God loved us because he found something good in us we would always be worried about losing his love because he finds something bad in us there's something more that I'm going to bet deals off guys didn't realise you were that bad it would always be a concern and in that case his love would never be a total miracle but God's love does not love us because we are useful to him he doesn't love us because we are better than someone else

[37 : 24] God in Jesus Christ simply says I love you simply because I am love that's it and that kind of love is perfect love perfect love that kind of love is the fountain of endless praise and gratitude and thanksgiving and that kind of love ultimately means that you grow more and more and more in humility the one major characteristic of the Christian humility because God has got nothing to do with me you see the

God of the Bible is so majestic he is so free he is so absolutely sovereign that any analysis that we want to do of his purposes and plan must ultimately end in worship worship it must end in worship it must merge into worship the God of Romans 9 will not simply be analysed he must be adored he's not simply to be pondered and read about he is to be proclaimed his sovereignty is not simply to be scrutinised it is to be heralded this Romans 9 is not details for controversy it is the gospel for sinners who know that their only hope in this world is the sovereign triumph of

God's grace over the rebellious will of human beings God in his mercy in Jesus Christ has tackled us to the ground shown us his glory a better way how dare we look down on anyone else Romans 9 comes after Romans 8 8 for this is not failed because it is grounded in God's sovereign electing mercy God's pure love and therefore the promises to the true Israel and the promises of Romans 8 stand that's the good news of

Romans 9 the promises purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ will be mercifully fulfilled by the sovereign power of a merciful loving God gracious God you are worthy of our worship of our honour of our allegiance of our love Father please forgive us that we live day by day and we make much of our self instead of making much of you please forgive us where we look down on other people where we are angry with others where we self righteously elevate ourselves over others give us more of your gospel of grace we pray thank you Jesus for your sovereign grace you have loved me the unlovable

Holy Spirit help us because our hearts and our minds are so small we cannot grasp or appreciate the majesty your majesty without you capturing our hearts and our minds and so as we read your word as we study your word oh put us we pray in our proper place at the foot of the cross our hands over our mouths and our hearts just cry thank you thank you thank you grow us we pray in humility as we adore Christ together amen