

ROMANS

Part 20: “Evangelism, Election, and the Glory of God”

Romans 9:1–29

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Sunday, July 24, 2022 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

Good morning, church family. It is a privilege to preach God's word to you yet again. After spending the last few weeks studying various Old Testament Psalms, we are returning to our year-long journey through Paul's letter to the church of Rome.

At Redeemer Christian Church, we deeply value what is known as expository preaching, wherein we often preach through books of the Bible, line by line, verse by verse. Often this approach to preaching exposes us to texts we might be tempted to avoid. Romans chapter 9 is undoubtedly one of those texts.

Our reading today is a long passage. It is a passage with complex theological ideas that will stretch our minds. And even more, it is a passage with truths that we will find deeply challenging.

So, even before we read this text together, I want to exhort you to pay attention. Don't check out. Don't get your defenses up. Don't fall prey to the temptation of dismissing the word of God when it perplexes you. Instead, let us seek to listen to the word of the Lord with attentive minds and humble hearts.

Our Scripture reading begins in Romans chapter 9, verse 1, and ends in verse 29.

“I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. For this is what the promise said: ‘About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.’ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but

because of him who calls— she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? 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.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea, ‘Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’ And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’ And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.’ And as Isaiah predicted, ‘If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah’” (Rom 9:1–29).

Almighty and Everlasting God, give us grace to understand your words today. Help us to know that your truth—even when your truth challenges us—is meant to set us free. In Christ's holy name, we pray.

AMEN.

Introduction

If we read Romans 9 honestly, it is a passage that should challenge us. It is a passage that is meant to stretch our minds and dislocate the tidy categories in which we want to organize our ideas about God. Romans 9 is a difficult passage to understand. Even more, what Romans 9 is saying is difficult for us to receive when we know exactly what it is saying.

Nevertheless, we believe with conviction that all Scripture is inspired by Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16). We believe that what God reveals is truth that his truth stands above all truth, and even more that his truth sets us free. So, with that in mind, let’s dive into this chapter with the desire to honestly, humbly, and determinedly wrestle with truth.

The title of today’s sermon is “*Evangelism, Election, and the Glory of God.*” There are three big ideas in that title that name the three big headings that we will unfold as we walk through Romans 9.

Exposition

1.) The Apostle Paul's Heart for Evangelism

Romans 9 is famous for what it teaches about the doctrine of election. However, Romans 9 does not begin with the doctrine of election. It begins with the urgent, heartbroken, and sincere evangelistic desire for salvation that the Apostle Paul has for those who do not yet worship Jesus as Lord.

Now recall, Paul has just been to the mountaintop of Romans 8. He has just rejoiced in the glorious truths that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus and that absolutely nothing can separate the people of God from the love of God (See Rom 8:1; 31–39).

And, now, flowing out of the rhapsodic wonder at the goodness and glory of the gospel, the last thing on Paul's mind is a sense of spiritual pride. Instead, he mourns over those who have seemed to have willingly rejected Jesus, especially those who—like Paul—are ethnically Jewish.

He believes if anyone should be able to marvel at the brilliance and beauty of all that Jesus has done, it should be the Jewish people. No one treasures the Law and the Prophets more than the Jewish people. No one has a richer understanding of the temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices than the Jewish people. No one has more reason to hope in the covenants of God and the promise of God's kingdom than the Jewish people (cf. Rom 9:4–5). Thus, it is a tragic irony in Paul's mind that the majority of Jewish people in his day would reject the very one to whom all the law, prophets, temple sacrifices, and covenant promises all point.

Now, it is true that the early core of the Christian church was essentially one hundred percent Jewish. Nevertheless, as the gospel went forth, and as the Christian church grew, many people from gentile nations came to faith in Jesus. At the same time, many Jewish people rejected Jesus as the messiah. In fact, in the first century, Jewish religious leaders were often the most violent and virulent opponents of the early church's very existence.

Paul knows this all too well. Paul has personally endured vicious persecution from Jewish leaders. He has been stoned and left for dead by Jewish leaders (Acts 14:19). Not long after writing this letter, a Jewish mob will attempt to murder him in Jerusalem, and when they fail, they will attempt to assassinate him (Acts 21:30–31; 23:12).

And what is Paul's response to all of this hatred and animosity? He doesn't hate them. He doesn't want to see them defeated. He was them to know and love Jesus so that they might be saved. He laments, *"I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh"* (Rom 9:1–3).

What an extraordinary display of heartfelt love for one's enemies! Paul is not *bitter* toward those who have maligned and abused him. He is *broken* for them. He appeals to Christ and the Holy Spirit, declaring that he wishes that he could be cut off—literally anathema (ἀνάθεμα)—so that his Jewish kinsmen might be saved.

I wonder: what is our posture toward the people in our culture whom we would most likely view as enemies? Are we training our hearts to love them? Do we earnestly pray that they might know the life-changing grace of Jesus? Would we rather see our enemies saved or silenced? Are we more passionate about our enemies being converted or crushed?

These are crucial questions to ask before we move on in this passage. You cannot rightly talk about Paul's doctrine of election if you cannot first grasp Paul's heart for evangelism.

When we dare to discuss the eternal destinies of those who do not know Christ, we must approach this topic with holy fear and trembling. Whatever we come to believe about the doctrines of salvation and sovereignty, we must not discuss these issues as a matter of casual sport or speculation. Rather, we must come before the word of the Lord with a sense of humility, gravity, and evangelistic concern for those who do not yet know Jesus.

Before we move on to the second point, there is one more thing that is important to understand from this early portion of Romans 9. Paul makes a bold theological point. Look at verse 6, "*But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel*" (Rom 9:6).

This is a major shift in perspective in how we understand the word "Israel" in the New Testament. According to Paul, Israel is no longer defined by ethnicity or nationality. "Israel" refers to the people of God; a people who are bound primarily not by flesh but by faith in Christ Jesus (cf. Gal 6:16).

He goes on to use an Old Testament illustration: "*...and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring*" (Rom 9:7–8).

The point here is that Isaac, one of the great forefathers of the Jewish people, was not born by the power of the flesh. Rather, his life is a miracle that could never have existed outside of the intervening power and initiative of God.

God called Isaac into life by the power of his promise. So too, God's gospel is summoning gentiles who were once spiritually dead and alienated from the people of God into salvation.

Paul's point here is that the salvation of the gentiles is not rooted in some type of inherent goodness or worthiness of gentile nations—far from it. Rather, the salvation of the nations is rooted in God's grace, God's will, God's choice, God's *election*.

2.) The Profound Mystery of Election

At last, we arrive at the doctrine of election. Now, I will be honest and let you know that the nature of election is debated among Christians. But, regardless, "election" (ἐκλογήν) is a biblical word, and it is found in this very passage: *"though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of **election** might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'"* (Rom 9:11–13).

The word "election" refers to God's sovereign choice and selection. As it relates to salvation, **The doctrine of election** emphasizes that the miracle of salvation is ultimately rooted not in the fallible will of man but in the gracious will of God.

And Paul will illustrate this point by setting up a series of contrasts from the Old Testament. Ishmael is born by the power of the flesh, but Isaac is born by the power of God's promise.¹ Esau is hated, but God sets his love on Jacob. Pharaoh's heart is hardened by God, but Moses is chosen by God to lead the people of Israel into deliverance.

Paul is showing us that the doctrine of election is not a new idea. God's sovereign grace has been the cause of salvation since the beginning of his plan for redemption. The doctrine of election is an Old Testament idea that Jewish people knew very well. After all, they, too, were chosen by grace.

As Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 7: *"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt"* (Deut 7:6–8).

But even more than the avalanche of biblical background concerning God's sovereign grace, Paul had his own reasons for seeing salvation as an act of God's choosing and initiative. For those of you who know anything about Paul's salvation experience, you well know that Paul believed in the transforming power of grace.

¹ The contrast between Ishmael and Isaac is not direct and explicit in Romans 9 as it is in Galatians 4:21–31. Nevertheless, it is clearly implied.

Paul did not become a Christian because he made a list of pros and cons about whether or not he should believe in the Christian gospel. Paul became a Christian despite his hatred of Christians and his active persecution of the church. Paul became a Christian because Christ intervened in his life, saved him, and called him to be a "chosen instrument" by which his name would be proclaimed among the nations (Acts 9:15).

Thus, the Apostle Paul is showing us that election is another way of saying that salvation comes by grace alone. We are saved not by our power, our plans, or our goodness. Our salvation is rooted in God's power, God's plan, and God's goodness. A high view of sovereignty and election is simply another way of stressing that our redemption begins and ends with the goodness of God's grace.

As verses 15 and 16 make explicitly clear, *"For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy"* (Rom 9:15–16),

Now, if we are honest, this remarkably high view of God's radical freedom and power and sovereignty often disturbs and threatens us. But I think we should press into the uncomfortable truth of *why* we shudder at the notion of such a powerful God.

The Bible shows us that since mankind's first disobedience in the Garden of Eden, sin has taught us to yearn for absolute independence, absolute freedom, and absolute self-determination. Since Adam and Eve's first sin and all the sins that have come after, we have wanted to be "like God" (Gen 3:5). So anything or anyone that threatens that sense of autonomy that we so desire makes us have a visceral reaction of resistance.

The notion of unrestrained power terrifies us. And there are reasons we should be afraid of power, in some sense. The long story of human history is riddled with tyrants and authoritarian regimes that have inflicted horror, abuse, and suffering on the weak. Humans are radically impaired by sin and self-interest, which warp our ability to steward power justly. This is why Lord Acton famously said, *"Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely."* And he was right—with one very crucial exception.

If the one who holds absolute power is also the definition of absolute goodness, then the truth of God's sovereign power is the best news possible. If the one who holds infinite power is also infinitely wise, then we have reason to rejoice. If the one who has the power to bend the arc of human history toward restoration and redemption is also the one who loved his people to the point of dying for them, then we have a sure and certain foundation of hope.

But what about the importance of our choices, you are probably asking. What about our agency and responsibility? To this, I say that the Bible does not teach what we might call fatalism. The doctrines of election and sovereignty do not exclude the realities of human choice or responsibility.

So, we might ask, how is it possible for the truths of divine sovereignty and human responsibility to co-exist? We might not be able to describe how these two seemingly

contradictory realities exist in a way that answers all our questions. In the study of logic, we call such a phenomenon an “*antinomy*.”

An antinomy is “*a contradiction of conclusions which seem equally logical, reasonable, and necessary.*”² But as J. I. Packer eloquently describes in his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility only form an *apparent* contradiction that is fascinatingly mirrored modern science’s understanding of light. Light is believed to exist simultaneously as both particles and waves, yet such belief seems impossible. Reason would seem to demand such an understanding of light as particles *and* light as waves is absurd. But the facts show otherwise. The facts point to mystery, where these mutually exclusive ideas must also be believed as mutually real. To presume otherwise would be reductionist and errant. Such a truth “scandalizes our tidy minds.”³ In the same way, the doctrines of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility must not be pitted against one another. These doctrines are both true because they are both biblical.

The truth of God's sovereignty simply means that the will of God is not limited by the will of man. He is the Creator. He is infinite and without limits. He exists perfectly free and independent of us, and he is contingent upon nothing in creation.

We, on the other hand, are part of creation. We are finite. We are limited. And all of our choices, for which we bear responsibility, are necessarily framed by his providence and power. For example, I did not choose to be born in 1984 as the son of Steve and Julie Ritchie. I did not choose to be born in the United States of America and have English as my first language. So, I am free to choose some things. But I would be a fool to think that my will is limitless.

No, my will is limited. But because of the truth revealed by Scripture, I know my will is not limited by chance and circumstance, but by a sovereign God who has a plan for me, for you, and for history. And more importantly, I can trust that the foundation of our salvation is rooted in the unfailing will of God, not the fickle and finite will of man.

As Paul summarizes in verse 18, “*So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills*” (Rom 9:18).

But does the truth of God’s sovereignty mean that he is unjust for judging those who reject him? That leads us to our third and final point.

3.) The Incomprehensible Glory of a God We Cannot Constrain

Paul knows exactly what he is saying. He knows what is saying is hard to swallow. And he has already anticipated the objections and defeater arguments that we might throw his way. Verse 14 asks, “*What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part?*” (Rom

² Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God*, 18.

³ Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God*, 19.

9:14). Verse 19 ups the ante even further, “*You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’*” (Rom 9:19).

Scripture itself has asked our questions for us. However, don’t get your hopes up just yet, because the way Scripture answers those questions may not be to your liking. Look back at our text beginning in verse 20: “*But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory*” (Rom 9:20–23).

Now, if you were able to listen to the very first sermon I preached from the book of Romans back in January, you may recall that Romans does hold a sacred place in my heart. It was during my sophomore year in college, while reading this book that the Lord opened my heart and showed me the beauty of Christ. I became a Christian as I read the first chapter of Romans, and for the next few months, I slowly read this book with a desire truly understand the gospel.

However, when I got to these verses of Romans 9, I was infuriated. I literally threw my King James Bible against the wall of my dorm room. It frustrated me to no end that Scripture provoked a question that it would not directly answer.

But I later came to believe that *there are no correct answers to inherently wrong questions*. And what the Apostle Paul is doing here is showing us the serious problems and flaws within our accusations against God.

After all, how can people with a limited understanding question God, who alone is infinitely wise? How can people, who have a flawed, sin-stained, self-serving vision of what is good and true, dare to cast judgment on the very God, who is the essence of goodness and truth? How can we charge God, who is the very standard of justice, with injustice?

Thus, while Paul’s answer is not satisfying at a rational level, it is the right answer. Paul is reminding us that God is God, and we are people. His glory is incomprehensible, and he will not be constrained by our limitations.

A few years back, I came across the work of a Dutch theologian named Herman Bavinck, and he taught me a distinction that I have found helpful when we come across these big ideas that seem to stretch our brains yet remain ever beyond us. He said that there is a difference between truth that we can *comprehend* and truth that we can *apprehend*.

To comprehend means to possess comprehensive knowledge about a given subject. This is the type of knowledge that a Ph.D. might have over his or her expertise or like what my youngest son might have in relation to the Avengers. But Bavinck believed it was

impossible to comprehend God. After all, how could we have a comprehensive knowledge of an incomprehensible God?

However, he said we can apprehend certain truths about God. Why? Because he has revealed himself to us in his word.

Thus, we will not ever be able to fully comprehend or explain the power of God. But we can apprehend the truth of God's unfathomable goodness. We rest in the kindness of his character and trust in the perfection of his wisdom.

And nowhere is the goodness of God more radically displayed than in the cross. Paul said that he wishes that he could be "cursed" for the sake of the salvation of those who do not believe. But on the cross, Jesus became cursed for the sake of his enemies (Gal 3:13). He who knew no sin became sin so that, in him, we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21). The cross of Jesus Christ reminds us that infinite power of sovereignty flows through nail-pierced hands that have known our sorrows.

So, I know it can be scary to read passages like this and wonder whether or not you are elect. But the mystery of election does not belong to us. It belongs to God, to whom belongs all power and glory; wisdom and strength.

The question you should answer is not "Are you elect?" The question you should answer is, "*Do you believe?*"

Do you believe in the sufficiency of Christ? Do you believe in his life, death, and resurrection? Do you rejoice in the reality of his ascension and hope for the promise of his return? If so, rest in his grace.

For those that do not yet believe, I plead with you to place your trust in Jesus today. For those that have loved ones that do not know Jesus, I want to challenge us to pray with the same urgency and fervor as Paul prays at the beginning of this chapter.

And even more, I want to challenge us to embrace the call to share the gospel with those who do not know Christ. After all, the same God who has sovereignly saved us has also sovereignly sent us to declare the good news of Jesus Christ. In fact, that topic is what Romans 10 is all about.

But that will have to wait until next week.

Conclusion

Until then, may we yearn to see the salvation of those who do not yet believe, even those who hate us and are our enemies. May we marvel at the mystery of divine grace and the God who saves sinners. May we rejoice that our God cannot be contained or coerced by our will or rationality. But may we be thankful that our God is infinitely powerful, infinitely good, infinitely kind, and infinitely wise. He is a God who is worthy of our worship and our trust. AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) Read Romans 9:1–5. Note that in the time the New Testament was written, the greatest source of persecution against Christians came from Jewish people who rejected Jesus. What is Paul's posture toward such people? Who are the church's most virulent enemies today, and how might this passage challenge us to love them?
- 2.) Read Romans 9:6–18. What are the various Old Testament stories referred to in this passage, and how does Paul use them to illustrate the truth of God's power?
- 3.) Read Romans 9:19–29. While this portion of Scripture is intentionally challenging for many readers, how might these verses help us grasp a sense of God's incompressible power and glory? Why is it a good thing that our God is bigger than our capacity to understand?
- 4.) Lastly, spend some time in your Gospel Communities praying for those you know and love who do not yet follow Christ.