

10. Romans 9



Paul has just presented the new grace-gift of God. It is union with Jesus. This communion breaks the dominion of sin by empowering us with Jesus' Spirit. It also gives us assurance of salvation if we accept this grace with faith, commit our life to him, and carry out the implications of this communion in our behaviour.

He has presented this new way powerfully and beautifully. He has done so with the hope of attracting a faithful Jew to see in it a way of life that takes him/her beyond the law, but is consistent with it; indeed, this new way brings the law to its promised goal.

However, certain problems remain. Sustained by what they know of Jesus and by their experience of his Spirit, Christians are being asked to live in hope of a promised, but not yet fully experienced, salvation. It had been the same for the Jews. They, too, had been asked to live in hope, and they had placed their trust in the same God. Yet many of them, by failing to embrace Jesus, were failing to receive the promise.

Paul wants to place beyond suspicion the fidelity of God, in spite of human failure. To do this he attempts to establish three things.

Firstly, at the time Paul is writing, only a small minority of Jews were accepting Jesus as the Messiah, and so enjoying the promises made to Abraham. Paul wants to make it clear that this situation is the result of widespread human failure to believe. It in no way calls into question God's justice or God's fidelity. In making this point, Paul reminds the Christians that exactly the same thing can happen to them. If it does, it will be for the same reason: their failure to believe, not God's failure to keep his promise.

Secondly, Paul has just claimed that nothing can separate a Christian from the love of God in Jesus. By our sin we can reject the love that is being offered to us; but nothing can stop God loving, and nothing outside us can come in between us and God's love. He wants to show that it is the same for a Jew. God has not changed.

Thirdly, he wants to present human history, with all its failures, as embraced by divine mercy. This does not take away the certainty of sin reaping its own self-inflicted punishment, nor does it replace the need for faith on our part. But it does put both of these in a wider perspective. It is the mercy of God which transcends everything else.

Romans 9:1-3

I am speaking the truth in the Messiah — I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit — I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were anathema and cut off from the Messiah for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.

In the first section of this letter, Paul attempted to establish that, though the message of salvation proclaimed in the gospel is ‘**for the Jew first**’ (1:16), and though Jews have the privilege of the law, they are, in fact, under the same dominion of sin as everyone else, and they have no privileged position as regards God’s justice. Nor do they have a privileged place as regards justification and salvation: they are to find these, like everyone else, through faith in what God has revealed in Jesus.

This led Paul to ask the question: ‘Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?’ (3:1). His immediate answer was: ‘Much in every way’ (3:2).

At that point, he was content to mention two advantages.

The first is that ‘Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God’ (3:2).

The second is that ‘through the law comes the knowledge of sin’ (3:20). He kept his full response for the present passage.

We catch here a glimpse of Paul's passionate love for his own people, even though they caused him so much suffering (see Acts 20:19). We note also that when Paul reveals his innermost convictions, in the same breath that he speaks of his conscience, he speaks of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Speaking from his communion in love, Paul assures them that he suffers 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish of heart' over them. He loves them so much and wants them to be open to the gospel so much, that, if it would help them, he is willing to be 'anathema', that is to say, separated from the community, offered up to God and left exposed and defenceless before the fire of God's judgment.

He makes this more explicit when, leaving reason behind, he declares that he is willing to be ‘**cut off from the Messiah**’ – Jesus to whom he is totally committed, heart and soul, and the community of love to which he belongs. This cry from the heart expresses something of the depth of Paul’s pain and of his love for his fellow Jews. It has a special pathos when we recall what he has just said about nothing being able to separate us from ‘**the love of God in the Messiah Jesus our Lord**’ (8:39).

There is an echo here of the prayer which Moses offered to God after the apostasy of his people: ‘If you will only forgive their sin — but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written’ (Exodus 32:32).

Romans 9:4-5

They are Israelites and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen.

Paul lists eight privileges which are enjoyed by ‘**his kindred according to the flesh**’ (9:3). He refers to his people as ‘Israelites’, the name given by God (Genesis 32:28). In doing so he emphasises God’s call and God’s promises. They are God’s chosen and holy people.

The first privilege is ‘**sonship**’ (υιοθεσία). They enjoy the privilege of being God’s ‘firstborn’: ‘Thus says the lord: Israel is my firstborn son’ (Exodus 4:22). ‘You are sons of the Lord, your God’ (Deuteronomy 14:1). This intimate relationship is poignantly expressed by Hosea (read Hosea 11:1-9). Jeremiah gives voice to God’s longing: ‘I thought you would call me, My Father’ (Jeremiah 3:19). This and the other privileges reach their climax in the promised Messiah who has come ‘**from them**’.

The final doxology, ‘**God, who is over all, be blessed forever. Amen,**’ is addressed to God in praise of all that God has done for Israel, with special emphasis on his gift of the Messiah

We are left in no doubt of Paul's loyalty to the faith he has inherited or of his love for his fellow Jews. In embracing Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, Paul knows that he has found a way of living Judaism in a complete way and of taking the faith he has inherited to the world. In this way he sees himself as part of the vanguard, bringing about at last the fulfilment of the hopes of his people, hopes born of the promises made to Abraham.

Freed from the historical limits developed over the centuries, Judaism, as lived by the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, can now reach out to the whole world, revealing that God is love and that everyone in the world is embraced by the love of the one God. People are not called to change their culture, to stop being who they are and to become something different. They do not have to stop being a Greek or a Roman and become a Jew. All that is asked of them is that they welcome the wonderful grace pouring out over the world through the love revealed in the living and in the dying of Jesus: welcome it in faith. It breaks Paul's heart that most of his fellow Jews cannot see God in Jesus and continue to do what the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem did when they rejected and crucified their Messiah.

Romans 9:6-13

It is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you' (Genesis 21:12). 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 descendants. For this is what the promise said, 'About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son' (Genesis 18:10,14). Nor is that all; something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband our ancestor Isaac. Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call) she was told, 'the elder will the younger serve' (Genesis 25:23). As it is written, 'Jacob I have loved, but I have hated Esau' (Malachi 1:2).

Faced with the fact that most Jews were not, in fact, embracing Jesus as the Messiah, some of the Jews in Rome, including some of the Jewish Christians, might wonder what has happened to God's promises. They have been taught to rely on God's word (see Numbers 23:19; Isaiah 55:10-11). It might appear that 'the word of God has failed'. In attempting to demonstrate that the failure is not God's, Paul begins by asking them to look again at God's word and to note that God never said that physical descent on its own would automatically mean that people would experience the fulfilment of God's promises. They must focus their reflections on God and on God's choice. The examples Paul uses establish this point quite successfully.

Paul's examples, while establishing the point which he wishes to make, also open up a further problem. It might appear that Ishmael and Esau had no hope. It might appear that God makes arbitrary choices, unjustly counting some in and some out. They might make it appear that God is unjust in his treatment of human beings.

It is just this kind of thinking that Paul wants to expose as wrong. However it was a mind-set that was common among Jews of Paul's day to think that God has chosen the Jews and rejected the Gentiles. Paul himself, no doubt, shared this way of thinking till he was enlightened on the road to Damascus. He does not immediately contradict it. Rather, as the following verses demonstrate, he begins by insisting that his readers keep their eyes fixed on God and see that everything flows from God's mercy.

Romans 9:14-18

What then are we to say? 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' (Exodus 33:19). So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. For the scripture says to pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth' (Exodus 9:16). So then he has mercy upon whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.

The question concerns God's justice. Paul's response focuses immediately on God's mercy. Justice in relation to God refers both to God himself and to God's relations with creation. In regard to God himself it refers to the fact that God always acts according to his nature. In regard to God's relations with creation it refers to God's *judgment* concerning people's behaviour. The tradition is that God judges us according to our behaviour and Paul could have responded along those lines. However, in keeping with Paul's focus throughout this whole section, Paul speaks of God's mercy. Since justice refers to the fact that God always acts according to his nature, Paul wants to make the point that it is God's nature to be merciful. In relation to creation mercy focuses, not on God's response to our behaviour, but on God's *initiative*. The focus is on God's creative and redemptive purpose, prior to and independent of how a particular person might accept or reject it.

Paul goes to the very heart of the Torah which recounts how God in his mercy redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. Paul takes us to the ruler of Egypt, the pharaoh, and refers to him in traditional biblical language as having his heart hardened by God. Were he focusing on the human dimension he would have spoken of human freedom and of pharaoh's rejection of grace. However, Paul does not want to deflect their attention from God, and so he sees even pharaoh's sin as coming within the providence of God, and he insists that God, in his mercy, used even the effects of pharaoh's refusal, as a means of revealing God's mercy. Not even Egypt could cause God to not be a God of mercy.

Romans 9:19

You (singular) will say to me then, 'Why then does he still find fault?
For who can resist his will?'

If pharaoh's stubborn resistance in refusing to listen to God was part of God's providence in revealing God's mercy, why should we accuse pharaoh of sin? Why should we accuse anyone of sin? It would seem that we are just puppets in God's plan for the world, fulfilling the role assigned to us and quite unable to resist God's will: 'Why does God still find fault? For who can resist God's will?' Paul takes up this problem immediately.

Romans 9:20-24

Who indeed are you (singular), a human being, to argue with God? Will what is moulded say to the one who moulds it, '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 special use and another for ordinary use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much magnanimous love the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory — including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

Paul could have responded to this objection by moving the argument to the human plain of decision, free choice and divine justice. However, he does not attempt a philosophical resolution to the problem of the relationship between the divine will and the exercise of human freedom. He accepts both as clearly true, and so would reject any solution to the problem that ignores either.

This passage, like the previous one, is concerned with divine *purpose* and *initiative*, and so with divine *mercy*. He reminds the reader of the limits of human ability to understand the profound mystery that is God.

Whatever might be the different uses for which a potter fashions vessels from clay, Paul reasserts the truth that everything willed by God is with a view to his ultimate purpose, which is to show mercy.

Even when – as was the case with the pharaoh whom Paul used as an example in the previous verses – we stubbornly resist God's will, God uses this very hardness of heart to bring about his merciful purpose. Such stubborn resistance calls down God's wrath, but God's mercy patiently holds back even the punishment which sin deserves, in order to effect God's transcendent purpose, which is to show mercy.

God will not tolerate oppression, nor will God tolerate his plans of mercy being frustrated. God is passionately concerned to liberate people from all kinds of slavery. The latest proof is the redemption effected in Jesus. Those who in spite of God's patience continue to attempt to obstruct God's merciful design will have to bear the consequences of their obstinacy.

Note that when Paul writes of 'the objects of wrath that are made for destruction' he does not say that God made them for this purpose. If any are in fact destroyed, it will be because of sin for which 'they are without excuse' (1:20); it will be because they have obstinately refused God's persistent concern drawing them to repentance (see 2:4). By contrast he says of 'the objects of mercy' that it is God who has 'prepared them beforehand for glory'.

The fact that there are Gentiles, too, in the Christian community (descendants of Ishmael and Esau included) shows that choice of Isaac and Jacob did not mean the rejection of Ishmael and Esau. God's merciful design embraces everyone.

We recall Paul's earlier words: 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified' (Romans 8:28-30).

Romans 9:25-29

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”’ (Hosea 1:9; 2:23). And ‘in the very place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” there they shall be called “children of the living God”’ (Hosea 1:10). And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved; for the Lord will execute his sentence on the earth quickly and decisively’ (Isaiah 10:22-23). And as Isaiah predicted ‘If the Lord of hosts had not left seed to us we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomorrah’ (Isaiah 1:9).

Thanks to the revelation of God that we received from the Messiah Jesus, we have come to see that God wants the Gentiles – the descendants of Ishmael and Esau – to be ‘**God’s people**’, God’s ‘beloved’. They are ‘**children of the living God**’ with all the richness of that expression as developed earlier by Paul. They are sharing in the life of God’s own Son, having received the ‘**Spirit of adoption**’ (8:15). Furthermore, though in fact most Jews have not (yet) welcomed their Messiah, there is a ‘**seed**’, as God proclaimed through Isaiah, and this seed holds the promise of a great harvest. This ‘seed’ are those Jews who have welcomed what God is offering in Christ and are part of the people of the new covenant.

Paul adds the words ‘**quickly and decisively**’ to the statement from Isaiah (perhaps drawing on Isaiah 28:22 where both words occur). His intention may be to underline the definitive nature of God’s saving action in Jesus. In welcoming the Gentiles, God is certainly not rejecting the Jews.

What matters for everyone, for Jews as well as Gentiles, is that we share the faith of Jesus. God’s initiative is always merciful. Learning from their past and attending now to the gospel, Jews as well as non-Jews are asked only to believe – that is to say, to welcome God’s loving offer of grace and salvation with the same welcome given to it by the Messiah, Jesus.

Romans 9:30-33

What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame' (Isaiah 28:16 in the light of 8:14).

The presence of Gentiles in the Christian community in Rome and elsewhere shows that communion in God's life is not limited to the Jews. The Gentiles can enjoy being in a right relationship – a communion of love – with God if they open their minds and hearts to welcome God's offer of grace.

The fact that the majority of Jews have not welcomed their Messiah shows that belonging to the Jewish race does not automatically mean enjoying divine communion. Like the Gentiles, they must welcome God's offer of grace.

They did not strive for righteousness on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works.

It is important not to misunderstand Paul by interpreting verse thirty-two, as is sometimes done, as a criticism of Judaism as a religion. Judaism acknowledged the principle that justification and salvation were not earned by 'works', but were to be accepted in joyful faith.

Paul's criticism, like that of the prophets before him, and of Jesus, was directed at those who, in spite of the inspiration of their religion, failed to believe.

To support his point, Paul turns to Isaiah. In Isaiah 28:16, God, dwelling in the temple of David's city (Mount Zion), is the one on whom the people can trust, and not their princes. In Isaiah 8:14, God becomes a stumbling block because of the people's lack of faith.

Paul sees this fulfilled in the one whom God has sent to carry out his will, his Messiah Jesus. Those who believe in him will not trust in vain. Those who reject him will stumble. They failed to believe because they found the cross a cause of scandal; they failed to believe in a Messiah who suffered because of the violence he faced, and who continued to trust God and to love us, revealing God's love in the way he suffered.