

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

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Romans 8 ends with a promise that “nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.” And Romans 9 begins on a plain of desolation, travail, and sorrow because as Paul treats that theme of nothing being able to separate us from Christ’s love, he looks at his countrymen after the flesh—Israel—and he must answer a question that is raised to him.

We remember as we go through Paul’s letter to the Romans that frequently we meet an imaginary objector who is saying to him, “But Paul! What about this point?” And this objector arises probably from Paul’s style in proclaiming the gospel in synagogues. That he was frequently interrupted and answered back the person who said, “What about this point?” He must face the objection that’s raised. He’d been talking about the eternal love of God for His people. “Now Paul, what do you do with this problem? What do you do with the problem of Gentiles that are coming into the Church, and those that have been the heirs of God’s promises in past ages seem to be excluded and separated. Are you saying that God only cares for people a certain amount of time, then casts them off?” This creates the problem of Israel, if you will. Paul addresses that theme. And, especially, we look at it this evening. How can God reject people whom He has elected?

I want to give warning before we get into Romans 9. That is we’re launching out, as it were, onto an ocean of unfathomable depths when we talk about themes like election and the sovereignty of God and predestination and foreknowledge.

It reminds me of a time when I was a kid. I’d go to the ocean and go out so far, but wouldn’t venture out any further because I couldn’t swim. Then I would go out so far in an inner tube. But even beyond that I would not go because you reach a certain point that even a child can recognize that the depth is so deep that it is scary. Jeremiah once, in talking about this very

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

theme, said, “If you have fainted when you have run with footmen, how will you contend when you run with horses?” (12:5). Or another way of saying, “If you lost the race when you’re running against people, how in the world can you expect to run against horses?” Suggesting that there are some levels of truth that, in examining them, they wear us out. Then what are we going to do when we come up against greater problems and greater issues?

Romans 11 closes with a statement: “How rich and how deep and unfathomable are God’s ways.” If God’s ways are that deep and mysterious and unfathomable, we would do wrong by starting out thinking that in a few short moments we can reduce it all to an easy understanding and walk away with a three-point outline safely tucked away in our minds. Martin Luther once said about this particular passage of Scripture, “The person who has not known passion [and here he does not mean love, but the passion of thought which makes you exercise yourself] to him who has not known passion, cross, and travail of death cannot treat foreknowledge without injury and inward enmity toward God.” In other words, the first reaction you have when you talk about sovereignty or election or foreknowledge is to get mad at God and to say, “You’re not fair.”

As we look at Romans 9 tonight, we notice three arguments against God that are coming from this objector to what Paul is saying.

The first argument we can see answered in verses 6–13 (NIV): “It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned’ [This means that it’s not the children of flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned His descendants]. For this is how the promise was stated: ‘At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.’ Not only that, but Rebekah’s children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

by works but by him who calls—she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ Just as it is written: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”

I. This first section deals with the question as to why it is that God could lay aside, or put off, a relationship with His elected.

Or another way of saying it is, “If Israel is the elect of God, why are they not now in the believing company of the Church. Has God cast them out? Does He have an automatic guarantee that they will be preserved?” There’s a doctrine called the perseverance of the saints, which says the saints, throughout all obstacles, will persevere and win glory in eternal life. Now the question is raised, “What about Israel? Have they ceased to persevere, and if they have, is this not an indication that God did not have the power to keep whom He initially called?”

I would say that this is an important issue for us as believers as well. If we have believed in God through Christ our Lord, does He not have the power to keep us if He has called us? This is the issue. How does Paul counter this? He counters by saying that not all who claim to be Israel are Israel, and God never, if you will, had a biological pact—a pact that guarantees that simply by virtue of heredity, who you were born to, then you would be an heir of life. This, for many in Paul’s day, would have been heresy. For there was an idea floating in that day—as we see various ideas floating today—that because you belong to a particular group, you are safe within that group. Yet, through the arguments which Paul advances, saying that it is not all the children of Abraham who participate in the promise God made to Abraham. Rather, it is the heir of promise. Not Ishmael, who was the biological heir of Abraham, but Isaac, who was the one promised. Therefore, Paul, by deduction, is saying it is still those who are the heirs of Abraham, who believe the promises God made to Abraham, which are included in the lineage of faith. Paul here, in this section, is providing us an answer to the question, “Why do spiritual movements die? Why do churches die? Why do denominations die?” Why is it, for example, that

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

just a few months ago when I stood in a place like Corinth there was nothing left? A church used to flourish in that place. People used to populate it. A vibrant center of the gospel now no longer is. I realize there are historical reasons beyond the theological reasons. But we can think, even of churches which we have known, that occurred within our lifetime which were great centers of gospel influence and gospel preaching, and now they have become powerless and empty.

I think of the experience I had even this last week to see the perils that are creeping into the church which I have been a part of all my life. I could not help but contrast the wonderful services we would have when we'd gather in the evening with the kind of thing which would happen during the daytime. Because as a church collects duties and responsibilities and properties and organizations and the like, it must concern itself with bylaws and organization and budgets and fiscal reports. So that we would sit—two to three thousand of us for eight hours a day—and talk about bylaw amendments and resolutions and financial things that are part of the kingdom of God. I guess that all has its place, but I could not help but compare the life that was reflected in that from the life of what we're seeing God do in the charismatic movement and in services that I have been in and say, "Are we drifting on a road where we become so concerned and locked in to the maintenance of the organization that we forget and leave behind the tremendous vitality of the Spirit of God which energizes the church?" Can we organize the church to death? Why do spiritual movements die?

I believe they die because generations come along that do not have the spiritual vitality of the first generation. And that the faith, for example, that was in Abraham does not become a faith transmitted to his descendants. But they attempt to be the children of Abraham without believing as Abraham did and without obeying as Abraham did—leaving the comfortable society in which he was to follow God wherever the call of God might take him.

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

So has God failed? Paul's initial answer to this is, "No, God has not failed because it was never God's purpose to simply bring into line a physical lineage who would pass on a faith by virtue of heredity." Someone has said, "God has no grandchildren," and that is so very true. All of us in this room today cannot relate to God on the basis of the faith of our parents or our grandparents or some spiritual person. It is our faith. And if it is not our faith, then we're not truly a child of promise. But Paul is saying in this section that God is free to determine the means by which He will relate to persons. And He's simply chosen to relate to people on the basis of their faith in Him.

This matter of God being free to relate to people as He chooses is a matter of real argument in the world today. There are many ways to relate to God in the modern parlance. Certainly one way is as good as another. How can any one particular faith claim exclusiveness, claim that, "Only this is the way; walk you in it"? And all other ways will lead to condemnation and the absence of eternal life. How can you say such a thing?

Paul's answer to that whole line of argumentation is, God is free. God is totally free to determine the means by which the human race will relate to Him. The first thing which a man must do is bend in humility before God and deny man's own freedom and confess God's freedom that He's free to do as He will. So God is free to establish the condition by which we relate to Him. And He's chosen to establish that condition as faith.

If God is free to determine this, He's also free to determine how He will save His people. What process He will use in bringing this faith about. We find this difficult verse: "As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'" (Romans 9:13). We have some problems with that verse. I like what someone said about this. "I have no trouble understanding, 'Esau have I hated.' But what bothers me is how God could ever say, 'Jacob have I loved.'" In understanding that Scripture, we first must look at the word "hate."

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

Probably a good way to understand it is to cross-reference Luke 14:26. Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” We know from looking at the Gospel text, when that word is used in that context, it does not mean that if you’re going to follow Christ, you turn to your wife and say, “I hate you!”

It reminds me of a story I heard of a Methodist missionary who had gone to a primitive area of the world and painfully worked among the people to bring them to Christ, and many had come to Christ. The bishop was going to come through and affirm all those who had come to Christ and baptize them, as well as he was going to perform the marriage ceremonies of some couples that wanted to marry. So the Methodist bishop, however, only knew English. The missionary was teaching each person how to respond correctly to the liturgy the bishop would ask them. The missionary had arranged that the converts would be baptized first. Then the couples would be married following. When the bishop arrived, the missionary took the courtesy of asking the bishop if he had an order that the preferred. The bishop said he wanted to marry the couples first. The missionary was then in a tremendous dilemma. It would be difficult to inform all of these people how to reverse their responses. But he did his best to instruct them. The first couple came to be married. The bishop asked the woman if she would have the man to be her lawful wedded husband. She replied with the baptismal formula, “I renounce the devil and all his works!”

We understand Luke 14 means to love less—that there is a preeminent love, and there is a secondary love. The love for the Lord is the preeminent love. So we can understand that here. We know in the Old Testament Scriptures that God blessed Esau, and He gave Esau promises as well. When we see this first quote, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,” what is being quoted is the prophet Malachi, who lived centuries after Jacob and Esau lived. He’s saying the outcome of those two children is now clearly seen: the fact that one is related to God and is loved by God;

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

the other is not. The last confrontation of a descendant of Jacob and a descendent of Esau occurs in the New Testament, where Jesus, the descendant of Jacob, meets Herod, the descendant of Esau. And one sees the Scripture in even a more fascinating light.

“Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated.” It is not hate in terms of, “I have chosen Jacob to eternal life, and I’ve eternally dammed Esau.” That is not what is being said there. Rather, what is being said is to accomplish the purpose of election, verse 11, when these two twins in the womb had done nothing good or bad, God, in order to accomplish the purpose of election, chose Jacob for that purpose. What is the purpose of election? It is the means, whereby God chooses to redeem us through Christ Jesus our Lord.

What is God’s purpose of election in regards to Jacob? Very clear. God has in mind to bring a nation into existence called the nation of Israel, through whom He will send prophets. To whom He will send kings. Through whom He will send His word in order to be a light to the world. Someone has said, “How odd of God to choose the Jew.” And yet, God did. Of His own free sovereignty, He chose among the nations of the world to choose the Jew through which the knowledge of salvation and light would come to the world. That’s God’s choice, not ours. He didn’t turn it over to the nations of the world and say, “I’d like you to elect a nation and the family that I’m going to work through.” It’s a matter of His sovereign election. Just as you have a certain kind of sovereignty in choosing your friends, God has a certain kind of sovereignty in determining who He’s going to use to bless the world.

How did God work through Jacob and through Israel? God had the freedom to choose this family, and from among this family to choose the lineage through which Jesus would come into the world. God exercises that freedom to determine the course of election. Again, I submit that election in this term is not so much a matter of eternal life and damnation. It’s not a question of individual salvation that is regarded in this word “election” in verse 11. It is a question of the

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

purposes of God and the way in which He brings His redemptive activity to the world. God has the freedom to elect that.

So Paul is saying, “If you object that God has cast off His people, God never cast off anyone who related to Him in the way Abraham did.” If you relate to God on the basis of faith, God is not going to cast you off. He only casts off those who feel that they can relate to Him on the basis of a secondhand experience, a secondhand generation, a biological or heredity thing, or a belonging to the right denomination or the right club or the like. But He has a linkage with all of those who have faith.

That’s why, I think, the genealogy ends in the New Testament. You read the New Testament and read genealogy. How exciting to open the greatest Book in all the world and find in the middle of it—in the New Testament—and find a bunch of names. It is tremendously exciting because it shows us the genealogy of Abraham and Jacob ends at a certain point of time, with Jesus of Nazareth who did not marry or have children. This means that with Him, the promises of the generation come to a close. All of those who inherit the promises can never inherit them biologically or by heredity because the line, genealogically, is over. It’s those who are heirs of Jesus Christ through faith who receive the promises of Abraham.

We share his faith. So Paul lays aside the first argument: “God has been unfair. He hasn’t kept His Word.” Paul is saying, “Yes, He’s kept His Word to all of those who had faith.” God exercises and reserves to himself the freedom to determine how the human race will relate to Him.

The second objection comes in verses 14–18 (NIV): “What then shall we say? [Paul’s anticipating this person interrupting him.] Is God unjust? For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. For the Scripture says to

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.”

II. This second question comes to grips with the theme, “If it is true that God has reserved to himself the freedom to determine how He will relate to us as human beings, can we trust God with that much freedom?”

We often equate “sovereignty” with “tyranny.” The people who are sovereigns in the world today are despots. You look at a country where you have a dictator, for example. And it is hard to find, over the length and breadth of the earth, where there is a fair dictator anywhere. We have learned that human nature is composed of such material that if a person has absolute sovereignty, as the saying goes, “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

In the United States, in our government, we have taken stern measures to make sure that no one in our country gets sovereignty over the people. Our government is based, not on trust, but upon mistrust. We have a legislative branch, the executive, and the judicial branches of our government because we don’t trust anybody. Isn’t that great? We don’t trust the executive. We need the legislative branch to keep the executive straight. If they can’t, the judicial will. We don’t trust one another. Therefore, when we come to the theme of the sovereignty of God, our America-loving hearts resent this and say, “Can we trust anyone with that much authority? Doesn’t God need some checks and balances? Maybe we can help Him out a little bit in that respect.”

Will God be just? Paul has ended that question first by saying “Yes, God will be just because God is free to show mercy.” Notice what he says first to Moses in verse 15: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.” The stress in God’s sovereignty is not upon His judgment, but it is upon His mercy. It is a miracle that, in the sovereignty of God, He chooses to relate to sinful

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

people at all. The fact that He would even relate to one is an act of sheer grace. An act of freedom on His part. So God is free and just when He shows mercy. But God is also free to dispense judgment. Thus the phrase, “He hardens the heart of whomever he will.” Or to Pharaoh, “I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my name proclaimed to you in all the world.” And: “He hardens the heart of whomever he will.”

When we were in the Book of Exodus last year, we looked that that phrase, “He hardened the heart of Pharaoh.” Because “He hardened the heart” is used three ways in the Book of Exodus. It’s used this way, “The heart of pharaoh was hardened.” It’s used, “Pharaoh hardened his heart.” And a third way: “The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” When we were going through Exodus, we noted, “The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart” was not used in the Scripture until the outbreak of the sixth plague, the plague of boils. But preceding that phrase, we had phrases such as, “Pharaoh hardened his heart,” or, “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.” It was as though the statement was, in effect, “The same sun which melts the butter, hardens the clay.” Pharaoh hardened his own heart against God, and God ratified Pharaoh’s hardening. So He hardens the heart of whomever He will. God has so constituted the freedom that belongs to Him and the freedom that belongs to us that His freedom does not violate our freedom, and our freedom does not violate His.

Again, the Scripture says the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart. We say as we read that that God has the freedom to dispense mercy. But God also has the freedom to dispense judgment. We’re afraid of this. We say, “I wouldn’t like to relate to a God that would have the freedom to send somebody to hell without a chance.” That’s what we’re worried about. We’re afraid that God is going to mishandle His authority. That He’s going to act unfairly. Paul is going to respond to that question direction in a moment, but what he’s saying now is he’s contending for the freedom of God to do as He will because He is God.

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

He's saying, if we follow Him carefully through this whole passage of Romans, something like this: Here is the freedom of God. God is free to act as He will—free to show mercy and free to harden. On the other hand, there is the freedom of man. "Whosoever will, let him come." We look at the two—the freedom of God and the freedom of man—and we say, "They must be mutually exclusive. How can man be free if God is free? Or how can God be free if man is free?" So we get varying emphases.

We get someone, on one side of the continuum saying, "God can't be totally free. God can't totally know. Therefore, God doesn't know from one day to the next what's going to happen. It's all determined by an intricate set of checks and balances, and someday He'll find out what's going to happen. He doesn't clearly know now."

There are others who say God knows so completely that you don't have anything to say about it. It's like the mission board said to missionary, William Carey: "Young man, when God chooses to save the heathen, He'll do it without your help or mine." So you get both sides.

Paul is leaving this thing, it seems to me, in kind of a mystery which says we accept the total freedom of God to do as He will. We accept the total freedom of man. Because we trust God, we leave it with Him to reconcile. God has so constituted His freedom and our freedom that one does not violate the other.

We get troubled when we read that phrase, "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart." All of a sudden we become very, very sympathetic to poor old Pharaoh. He didn't have a chance! I think that would be a terrible misreading of Scripture and history. We would have done a lot worse to Pharaoh than God did to him. We'd have done more than harden his heart. We would have taken a karate chop to his neck or a sword to his heart. God, in His mercy, simply hardened him and used that hardness as a means by which God would display His glory in saving Israel.

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

One person has said, “The sovereignty of God is absolute. Yet the sovereignty of God is never exercised in condemning those who ought to be saved, but rather, as a result of the salvation of those who deserve to be lost.” So that when we look at the sovereignty of God and ask, “Will God be fair?” The answer is, “Yes, because God shows mercy.”

Paul’s objector really has not understood that God treats us better than we deserve, not worse than we deserve. So he has yet another question. In verses 19–24 (NIV): “One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’ [He hardens Pharaoh’s heart. Who can resist?] But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?”’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, who he prepared in advance for the glory—even us, who he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?”

III. So the third question is again saying, “Will God be fair?”

And the implication of the question as it is raised, “No, God won’t be fair. We’ll still find fault with Him because who can resist His will? Once God, in freedom, has decided something, nobody can resist it. And as proof that God isn’t fair, He’s going to save some and damn others, and we can’t relate to a God who is like that.”

This kind of question thoroughly resents God’s freedom. It’s saying, “If God is free to do as He will, then man cannot possibly be free.” In this kind of a statement to God is hidden all the bitter accusation and charges made against God—that the God who created the human race is basically unfair. God is ultimately responsible, this questioner is saying, for human evil because He has elected to bring it into existence. And He has elected to allow it to continue. And, ultimately, if

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

we are damned, it is God's fault and not ours. He takes the responsibility because He decided it, not us. That's the spirit of this question, "Is God fair?" It's being asked with a cynical tone in the voice.

We could translate Romans on cassette tape. Voice inflection makes a lot of difference. This time, the voice is of a cynic is saying: "Why does He still find fault? Who can resist His will?"

Notice how Paul responds. He makes two responses.

He made, first of all, a response to the individual who is being sarcastic with God, who believes that God will not be fair. Then he makes an answer to the person who believes that God will be fair.

To the person who does not believe that God will be fair Paul says, "Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" I've seen parents do this with children. If you come to God from a hostile, angry point of view and say, "God! Why?" God is going to say, "Who are you?" The commandment is so clear, "You shall not put the Lord your God to a test." And God simply will not allow himself to be put in a chair and cross-examined by an unbelieving heart. He will not allow it. To allow it is to take away from His majesty and His sovereignty. He will be God, and He will not condescend to trade places with finite minds. Who are you, a man, to say to God, "God, You're not fair." Who are you?

I think the Book of Job is the most helpful book in the Bible to understand this matter of questioning God. Job was not a cavalier kind of person. He was not a skeptic. He was not an atheist arguing against God. He was a devout man who loved God very deeply. Yet he was deeply puzzled and bewildered because he could not understand what God was doing with him. You know how Job was afflicted with boils and physical afflictions, how his family and wealth all disappeared in a series of terrible tragedies that came one after the other. To top it all off—all of his sorrows—he was afflicted by three counselors, three torturers who called themselves his

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

friends, but who had come to argue with him in his pain and despair based on the presupposition that all suffering must be caused by sin. That sounds like some teaching I've heard. All suffering is caused by sin and all sickness is caused because you don't have faith. Therefore, Job's suffering was somehow because he was a sinner, and his pain was coming more strongly as he refused to admit to people the terrible evil which he was supposed to have done. So these three torturers hounded poor Job and examined every nook and cranny of his experience.

Finally, in the depth of his despair, Job cries out. He doesn't blame God, though, and that's the glory of the Book of Job. Job never blames God for his tragedy. He never tries to presume that he's on a level to argue with God. But he does come to God and say, "Lord, I don't understand this. If You would come and stand before me and let me plead my case, I could show You how unfair it seems to me." That's as far as Job goes with God.

In chapters 38 through 41 of Job, God does appear before Job with tremendous power. It flashes with brilliant illumination of how God relates to the human race. God says something like this, "You wanted a chance to argue. You wanted to ask Me some questions about your life. Here I am. But before you get started, I have a few questions to ask you. I want to see if you're qualified to ask Me any questions. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Where were you when the morning stars sang together and I flung the heavens into space? Were you there? Were you there when all these things began to be worked out? Can you enter into the secrets of the sea? Do you understand how the rain works and how the lightning appears? Do you understand? These are simple things to Me."

Job has to hang his head and say nothing. God goes on, "Look at the stars, Job. Can you order their courses? Can you make them cross the sky, always on time? Can you handle the universe?" Then God uses leviathan and behemoth, two strange and formidable creatures, to examine Job's qualifications to handle satanic power. He says, "Can you handle Satan? Do you know how to

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

handle this fantastic dragon that can whack a third of the universe with his tail? Are you able to take him on?"

Finally, Job ends up on his face in the dust before God and says, "I didn't know what I was getting into when I sought to question You! I meant to say a few things to You. But You're not in my league at all. I repent in sackcloth and ashes. I put my hand on my mouth. I have nothing to say to a God like You."

Paul says, "Who are you, O man, to reply against God? You don't even understand a tiny fraction of the things that are, and yet you presume to bring God into the court of judgment. Who are you to answer back to God and to challenge His sovereignty and freedom, and accuse God that He may not be fair?"

So this is a tremendous passage teaching us humility in the presence of God. You cannot put one little star in motion. You cannot shape one single force, or fling a mountain up, or sink an ocean. Presumptuous judging, large with unbelief. Since God is God, He has the right to do whatever He wants. He is accountable to no one. That's what Paul is saying to the response of unbelief. Challenge God with that haughty kind of spirit, God will put you in your place.

But there is another kind of thing I think we need to notice. God gives the heart of the sincere person answers. "Has not the potter right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?" (Romans 9:21). Paul is using that as an argument for the sovereignty of God, saying God has the right to do whatever He wills.

We're still wrestling with the question, "Will God will to do something which is wrong?" Of course not. Will God be unjust? No. So the argument of the potter, in Paul's thinking, is used—stating the sovereignty of God.

Then we need to go on and look how God especially applies that argument if we're going to apply it to daily life. The potter and his pots are only one aspect of the Creator's relationship to

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

creation. Pots are not made in the potter's image. Men, because they are made in the image of the Creator, insist on answering back. But there are different ways of answering God back. There is the answering back of faith, as a Job or Jeremiah calls for an account of God's mysterious ways. Even Christ can cry, "Why?" There is, on the other hand, the answering back of unbelief or disobedience, when man tries to put God in the dark and sit in judgment on Him. It is the man like this who Paul sternly rebukes and reminds him of his creaturely status. Paul has been misunderstood and unfairly criticized. Through failure to recognize that is the God-defying rebel and not the bewildered seeker after God whose mouth He shuts. God, in His grace, does supply answers to His people's questions. But He will not be cross-examined on the judgment bar of a hard and impenitent heart. God is not brought into judgment by anyone. We do not hold an election every four years to determine whether or not God is going to remain in office. He is going to stay. God is God. I've never especially liked the phrase, "God is still on the throne," because it almost infers that there may have been a time when he temporarily left it.

But I would say He's still on the throne. But what about the question, which comes with sincerity, "Will not God be fair?" And Paul, in verse 22 and 23, I think, sets carefully in wording, "What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory?" Notice, on the one hand, in verse 22, "the vessels for destruction." The agent of destruction is not noted. What is the agent of destruction? Did God make them for destruction, or is it conceivable that God, in the processes He's allowed, has permitted the vessels themselves to make themselves fit for destruction?

Every vessel of mercy has been prepared beforehand, and God is the Agent of preparation. To put this in a more striking way, I would quote Jesus when he says in the parable of the sheep and

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

the goats in Matthew 25, “There still comes a day when He will say to his own, ‘Enter in, for the kingdom was prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’ But to the wicked He will say, ‘Depart, for hell was prepared for the devil and his angels.’” God has prepared glory beforehand for us. If, however, we choose the other, it is not God that elected us to damnation. We have had participatory part in refusing His mercy.

Paul says in Romans 11:32, in this same section of the book (we need to jump ahead to put 9:22-23 in focus) “God has consigned all men to disobedience that he might have mercy on all.” In other words, in the sovereign grace of God, God chose to put an original man and woman in a safe paradise, an environmental place of hospitality. And in His sovereign grace, He chose to elect a process by which they would either relate to Him or disobey Him and fall into sin. When they fell, the whole human race went with them. Every vessel is made for destruction in that sense because, “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). But on the other hand, the Scripture says, “To as many as received him, to them he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12). These are the vessels prepared beforehand for glory.

I think that’s as far as I can go in relationship to the sovereignty of God and the sovereignty of man. My mind is not able to go further than this. I leave it still saying there is a mystery involved and I would be foolish to say to you, “In the last forty-five minutes, I have just solved the greatest theological riddle that has ever baffled the human race.” I have come as close as George Wood can come, but I have tried to come on biblical ground. I have tried to come in the language which Paul himself uses. He has asked the question, “Will God be fair?” And he has answered in verses 22 and 23 to the believing heart, “If God has shown his wrath to make known his power—endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction in order to make known the riches of his glory...”

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

Why does the world keep on going as it is? Why does God continue to allow evil to exist? Why doesn't He just act against it? He is enduring the vessels of wrath so that His glory may be shown in His vessels of mercy.

What is an analogy to that on a human level? How can we understand that? There may be some of you here who have braces on your teeth. I would call these vessels of wrath. They are not pleasant to wear while they are there, I understand. But it is their presence there which later makes possible the emergence a beautiful set of teeth. The vessels of wrath will be discarded, but they served their purposes. Why is it that God lets all the evil go on in this country? Why doesn't He just end it? It's, first of all, because of His patience. Like Peter said, "He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to everlasting life." But it's also to allow the beauty of His people to shine forth in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation.

I think, particularly, if I were to develop a theology of our country, I would understand that God has permitted us the freedom which we have had and allows the evil to go unjudged because there have been vessels of mercy who have responded to Him in this country and have a heart for His cause and His work throughout the world. God has, for the sake of these, preserved them. Will God be fair? God is saying, in the ultimate sense, "Ask the redeemed. Ask the Gentiles if God is fair. Ask those who Hosea speaks of: 'I will call them "my people" who are not my people; and I will call her "my loved one" who is not my loved one' (Romans 9:26, NIV)." It is those included in God's grace who respond in the affirmative: "Yes, God will be fair. He was more than fair to me. He showed me His grace." Those are striking terms from the prophet Hosea: "not beloved" and "not my people." Remember, Hosea was told to marry a harlot. When these children were born, perhaps there was a real question on his mind as to the source of their parentage. He called the one "not my people" and the other "not my beloved." Then the prophet was told by God that this was a model. This was a parable, related to the nation itself, and then

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

related to the Gentiles. “Call ‘not my people’ my people. Call ‘not beloved’ beloved.” This is how God responds to those who have been outside the family.

Paul is saying to his first-century audience, and now the twentieth-century audience, “Look at those outside the walls of the institution of religion or Judaism or the Church. See out there the rejects of the human race? See that there I also have a people that I’m drawing to Myself. If, within the walls of the institution, you’re trying to relate to Me genealogically, you’re trying to relate to Me because you are the heirs and you’re going to cash in on what another generation has done, be assured that I will take only those who relate to Me in faith. I will take any person in the whole wide world who relates to Me in faith. The worst person, I will take and bring that person to Myself so that the one who is not My people shall become My people and the one who is not beloved shall become beloved.”

Paul is finally saying, “Ask the remnant of Israel if God is not fair.” Isaiah had prophecies:

“‘Though the number the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.

For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.’ It is just as Isaiah said

previously: ‘Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like

Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah’” (Romans 9:27–29, NIV). In other words, it is the

mercy of God. Paul is saying that there have been many from his own kinsmen who have been

left alive to call on God and relate to Him. The sheer mercy of God.

We look at the nation of Israel today and we have to ask the hard question, “Why is it that there

is not a nation today called Philistia or the Babylonians?” All of these people have gone,

consumed in God’s wrath. In the inevitable process of history, which calls forth judgment for the

wrongs which have been committed by the people and their rulers, one people has survived. An

ancient people. We look at their future in Romans 11. But the fact that some of them have been

preserved, and from their preservation there has come a believing remnant, is a token of God’s

THE FREEDOM OF GOD

Romans 9:1–33

mercy. If He were anything but merciful, the whole human race would be gone. But in His mercy, He gives us a chance to respond to Him.

So we come to the last section: “What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They have stumbled over the ‘stumbling stone.’ As it is written: ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame’” (Romans 9:30–33, NIV).

Paul is seeing this image of a path which people are walking down. In the middle of the path is a great stone. Some, walking down the path, stumble right over the stone. Others, seeing the stone, stand upon it. Jesus is that Rock of Offense, or that Place to Stand. God, in His own freedom, has elected to send Jesus His Son into the world to be our Savior. That is the fundamental issue that confronts you and me as human beings. We can say to God, if we want to argue with Him, if we want to intellectualize with Him, “Couldn’t You use another way?” God says, “In My freedom of personality, in My freedom to be God, I have chosen from all eternity, before the foundation of the world, from eternity past, I have chosen to send Jesus My Son to be your Savior. In My freedom, I have sent Him. And I give you freedom to respond. He will be to you a Stone on which to stand and have life, or a Stone on which to stumble and be damned.”