

The Absolute Sovereign Freedom of God - Part 2

Romans 9:22-29

August 5, 2018

Introduction:

Over the past few weeks, we've been working through what is one of the most difficult and challenging chapters in all of Scripture. This morning we have one more sermon to get through on the topic of God's sovereignty in salvation which is basically a continuation of the message last week. But since I can't assume you were all here last Sunday (much less remember the passage from last week if you were here), I need begin by spending a little time reviewing and getting us up to speed. The apostle Paul is making a very tight, reasoned argument in this passage and we need to follow it in order to understand what brings us to the particular text we'll be going through together this morning.

Review

So we're going to get right to it. Please open your Bibles to Romans 9 . It can be found on pg. 945 of the pew Bibles if you need to use one of those. I'm going to quickly review the chapter in order to help us follow the flow of argument, so please have your Bibles open so you can see for yourself how the apostle Paul makes his case here. So let's begin our review by reading v. 1-5 of Romans 9. Paul writes, **"I am speaking the truth in Christ - I'm 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."**

Paul begins by expressing his deep concern of his fellow Jews who don't believe in Christ, in spite of all the benefits given to them in the OT. It would seem God's promises to them have failed since it was assumed that they as a nation were God's chosen people and yet they, on a whole, were not being saved. So this then raises a potential question: has God failed to keep his promises to the Jews and if so, could God also fail to keep the promises made to us in Christ that Paul so gloriously laid out in Romans 8?

To address that concern, Paul says this in v. 6-12. **"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.'"

Paul's answer to the problem is that the promise of salvation was never for all of Israel but rather only for a select few, for those he calls the **"children of promise."** Being physically descended from Abraham didn't make you a true Jew, but rather it was by being chosen by God. Paul uses two case studies from the OT to illustrate that truth: God chose Isaac instead of Ishmael and he chose Jacob rather than Esau. And to be clear that God's choice was made apart from any consideration of merit in the individual, Paul says God chose Jacob over Esau before they were born or had done anything either good or bad.

So Paul dealt with one can of worms by opening up another. Since God's promises were not made to all of Israel corporately but only those individuals whom God chose, that preserves the reliability of God's promises but at the same time raises a question about God's justice. If God chose Jacob over Esau before they had done anything, that sounds like God is being unjust. God electing some to salvation and not others raises the question of whether there is injustice on God's part. So Paul anticipates this objection by asking this starting in v.14, **"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."**

Rather than back down and say God's choice was based on a something God foresaw in the individual, he doubles down on his insistence that God shows mercy on whoever he wills and hardens whoever he wills and that his decision is not contingent on **"human will or exertion, but on God."** God is absolutely free to save or harden whoever he wants. Mercy is not an obligation but a gift and God may freely grant it to someone such as Jacob or he can withhold it, such as he did for Esau and Pharaoh. Salvation is completely based on God's choice of us and not on any human decision or merit.

Well, that then raises an even further objection. If God's choice is the sole determining factor in who receives mercy and in who is hardened, then, unsurprisingly, it raises this objection in v. 19, **"You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?'"** If we have absolutely no say in the matter of whether we're saved or damned, then how in the world can God rightly hold us accountable? If I'm unable to resist his will, how can God justly find fault in me for not believing in him if I couldn't have done otherwise? That's the pointed question we were wrestling with last week. Let's see how Paul answers it in v. 20-21. **"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?"**

Paul rebukes the questioner for implying that God is somehow unjust or unrighteous to save some and not others. Once again, Paul doubles down on his insistence that God is

absolutely free to do what he wants with his creation, and like a potter, if he wishes to use some clay for honorable purposes and some for dishonorable purposes, then God has the absolute right to do so and we're in no position to question him or sit in judgment on him. God can save or harden whoever he wishes: that's his divine right as the Creator and if we attempt to dare judge him for it, we are met with a rebuke.

So that's the fly-by summary of Romans 9 thus far. Paul's argument is clear: God chooses whomever he wants to save, his choice is not made based upon anything in us that would obligate him to choose us - whether good or bad deeds or human choices - and we're in no position to question him for it because as the Creator he possesses the supreme right to do what he wants with his creation, either to give mercy or to harden hearts. But there's more Paul has to say that we didn't have time to cover last week and that concerns both God's purpose in saving some and not others as well as his plan to save some from out of a larger group as revealed in the OT. So I know this has been a long on-ramp to get to the actual text we'll be focusing on this morning, but it's important to keep the context in mind as we press onward. So now let's finally get to the first of two points I have for us today and the first one is this...

1. God's purpose is to make known the riches of his glory for his vessels of mercy

Let's turn our attention to v. 22-23 to see where this first point comes from. Paul goes on in this paragraph to say this, **"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..."**

Paul pulls back the curtain on God's purposes in not saving everyone. The first part of this statement concerns **"vessels of wrath"** which are those God hasn't chosen to save. These are people God has allowed to remain in their sin and has even hardened them in it, such as was mentioned in Romans 1 where we were told three times that God *"gave them over"* to increasing wickedness. Paul probably has Pharaoh from the Exodus in mind here, since he just recently mentioned him a few verses back. God showed **"his wrath"** and made **"known his power"** by using Pharaoh's sinful resistance to bring about the ten plagues and bring judgment upon the Egyptians.

But why did God do this? Why did he harden Pharaoh's heart and not extend mercy to him? Paul tells us why in v. 23, **"...in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory..."** The **"vessels of mercy"** are specifically the Israelites in the Exodus, but more generally refer to those God has chosen to save. So as a result of Pharaoh's stubborn pride and sinful rebellion, God made the riches of his glory known to the Israelites by miraculously delivering them from slavery through the Exodus. It was because of Pharaoh's hardness of heart that God more fully shined forth his redeeming love and mercy to his chosen people.

So the principle is this: God uses his wrath against the wicked as a way to highlight the glory of his mercy and grace to those he saves. It acts as a point of contrast, just as a diamond looks more brilliant against the backdrop of black velvet. The wrath of God

against sinners makes the light of his grace towards the redeemed shine all the brighter. If God simply saved everyone such that he gave mercy and grace to everyone, then I wouldn't see as clearly the sinfulness of sin nor would I be able to behold his wrath and perfect justice. That God judges sin in his righteousness is also part of his glory, and so in order for us to behold that aspect of his glory, he must manifest it against sinners. His wrath against sin serves to make the redeemed more fully appreciate his mercy and grace given freely to them.

Now this is not an easy concept for us but again, let me try to help by making this personal and explain what I think this means. I've mentioned a number of times throughout Romans 9 that my father wasn't a Christian and died without ever coming to faith in Christ. So I have every reason to believe he will suffer the wrath of God in hell for his sin. But then the question can be asked, how can heaven be truly joyful if I know a loved one is instead suffering in hell for all eternity? Perhaps you've wrestled with that question yourself. These verses provides an answer, even though on this side of eternity it's a difficult one: it's saying I'll understand the riches of God's glory better through God's just judgment of sin. It means the just punishment my dad receives will display God's glory because it will reveal his perfect righteousness, for which I will praise God for. In heaven there won't be any sense of "Hey, that's unjust!" when I rightly recognize sin for what it is and therefore see that hell is indeed the just punishment for my father's rebellion against God. In short, hell will be something that reveals the glory of God's righteousness and thus it will be seen as a praiseworthy thing because it reveals more clearly the holiness and justice of God.

Furthermore hell will make me realize more fully just how amazing the grace of God is, that he would choose to save me when I deserve exactly the same punishment. God's saving grace will be seen as even more amazing because I'll know that I deserve hell for my sins and yet did not receive it. Therefore, by not saving some and leaving them in their sins, God **"makes known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy"** by allowing us to recognize what our sins truly deserve, which he does by choosing not to save some and allowing them to continue traveling down the wide road that leads to destruction unhindered.

This is actually an application of Romans 8:28. Remember what that passage says? It says God works all things for the good of those who love him. "All things," including the damnation of the wicked, including my father, because the fires of hell will proclaim the glory of God, both of his just and righteous wrath against sin as well as help me to comprehend more fully how utterly amazing it is that God would save a wretch like me. God will use even hell itself to bring glory to himself for the sake of his elect.

But having said that, let me be honest with you: that's not an easy thing to say. This passage makes me uncomfortable and is quite unsettling. While I can understand intellectually how the damnation of individuals is used by God to make known the riches of his glory to the redeemed, from my limited perspective it seems a dreadfully high price to pay. If I might personalize the words of this passage for a moment so as to read it, **"[God] endured with much patience [my father] prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for [me],"** that's an extremely difficult

truth to come to terms with. Do I really want to know God's riches for me when it comes with such a price tag? Can I worship a God who endures with much patience people he chooses not to save, even though he could, in order to make his grace to the elect shine all the brighter? Admittedly, I don't have easy answers. I understand it intellectually but it is a bitter pill to swallow emotionally.

So, I'm going to have to leave this here, knowing I've launched no shortage of heated lunch conversations once again. But I encourage you to wrestle with it, as I have, and trust God in it, as opposed to accusing him of wrongdoing or injustice. While we do not know all things when it comes to this passage, one thing we do know is that we cannot dare sit in judgment of God and accuse him of acting in an unrighteous manner. But I need to move on now and move through the last six verses of our text this morning. So then, our second point that comes from this passage is that...

2. God's plan has always been to choose for himself a particular people

The rest of this passage consists mostly of quotations from the Old Testament that have one purpose: to demonstrate God has always had as his plan to choose people from a larger group to be his own. So look back in your Bibles now starting at v. 24 and we'll briefly walk through these together. Paul continues on in v. 24-26 saying, **"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."'"**

The point in quoting from Hosea is to show that God was not only going to call people from the Jews but also from the Gentiles as well. This emphasizes God's absolute sovereign freedom to call whomever he wants from whatever people group he wants. While the Jews were God's chosen people in that they as a nation were given a special responsibility to reveal God through their obedience to the Law, God was not in any way limited to saving them alone. Just as the Jews were once not his people, but were made God's people by his calling of Abraham, so also did God promise to extend that call to the Gentiles as well, which is exactly what was happening through Paul and those who proclaimed the gospel. The Romans themselves were part of the fulfillment of this promise given in Hosea. God had chosen to save them according to his free sovereign grace, making those who were once pagan Gentiles part of the family of God.

Now let's look at v. 27-29. **"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.'"**

Whereas he was speaking about the Gentiles when quoting from Hosea, in these two passages from Isaiah the point is to demonstrate that God has chosen a remnant from within Israel to save out of the larger nation. Further, if he hadn't chosen to save any by his sovereign grace, they all would have been like Sodom and Gomorrah in that they would have been destroyed by God's wrath for their sins.

So taken all together, Paul is attempting to demonstrate that what he's been teaching throughout Romans 9 about God's absolute sovereign freedom to save whomever he wishes apart from any merit, either good or bad, has been the way God has worked all throughout history. The example of Jacob and Esau, the example of Pharaoh in the Exodus, and even the words of the prophets demonstrate that what Paul is teaching about God's sovereignty in salvation is nothing new. It has been the case throughout the OT before Christ and continues to be how God operates today. God chooses who he wishes to redeem and who he wishes to harden and thus salvation is purely given by the sovereign grace of God, apart from anything in us.

Conclusion

With that then, we come to the close Paul's extended defense of the sovereignty of God in salvation. While there still is more in Romans 9 that we need to discuss, v. 29 here brings this particular topic of discussion to an end. But as I wrap this up, there are some things I need to say because I know there's been a fair amount of frustration, irritation, anger, and annoyance over the content of my sermons over the past few weeks. So in light of that, I need to make three important statements before we're done. The first is this...

This is a non-essential area of doctrine we can disagree on...

I said this last week but it's worth repeating in case some of you weren't here: we can disagree on this issue. It's okay if we don't see eye-to-eye. I come from a Reformed understanding of how God operates in salvation, which emphasizes God's sovereignty. Other people place a heavy emphasis on man's free will. Both positions are well within the realm of orthodoxy. There are Bible-believing, Jesus-loving people on both sides of the aisle. This isn't a core issue of doctrine: Christians can and do disagree on this. As I said last week, there are house issues and yard issues. The house issues are central doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the Trinity or the inspiration of Scripture or the deity of Christ. Those doctrines define what it means to be a Christian.

But there are many yard issues, meaning you're still on the property of Christianity but you have freedom to roam in your understanding. Christians come to differing conviction about matters such as baptism or church government or the days of creation and that's fine. The doctrine of election is one of those yard issues, so if you disagree with what I've been saying over the past few weeks, that's perfectly okay. No harm done. We can agree to disagree on yard issues such as these. Believers have been disagreeing about this for many centuries. This isn't a core doctrine of the faith and so if we don't see eye-to-eye on it, that's fine. I'm not angry with you because you don't agree with me and I'd hope you don't harbor ill-will towards me because I land where I do on this issue.

But my first point here has an ellipsis which means I need to add to my original statement: This is a non-essential area of doctrine we can disagree on...

...but that doesn't mean it's not important.

Even though we can disagree, it doesn't therefore mean it isn't important. The Bible has a lot to say about salvation and specifically the doctrine of predestination and election of mentioned numerous times, most notably in Romans 9. So it's not an obscure area of theology: it comes up frequently and so it's important we talk about it when it does. Think of it like a car: an engine and four tires are essential to a car; air conditioning is not. You can have a car without air conditioning: it's not essential to its functioning. But it's still pretty important to you, isn't it? If you're going to buy a car that runs fine but the air conditioning doesn't work, is that going to matter to you? I think it will. So then, the doctrine of election is not essential in that you can operate as a Christian perfectly fine regardless of the position you take, but it is important. It matters. It's not some minor side issue that never comes up in the Bible. It comes up many times and so because God views it as important, we shouldn't be cavalier in dismissing it.

So when I say that we're free to disagree, I'm not saying you should shrug your shoulders and just write off the past few sermons. Take seriously what God's Word says. Wrestle with it. If you disagree with me, spend time reading and re-reading Romans 9 and ask yourself if what you believe and what Romans 9 teaches about God's role in salvation make sense. Hard passages demand hard work. The milk of God's Word goes down easily; the meaty parts you need to chew on. Romans 9 is the T-bone steak of the NT. Put your intellectual teeth into it. It's there in Scripture and it matters and therefore it is worth you giving serious effort to try to understand it and allow it to challenge you.

My second statement I need to make begins like this:

I need to preach what I believe the Word of God teaches...

My responsibility as a pastor is to preach God's Word, but I can only preach it out of my convictions. I can't preach it from another person's perspective. When I'm at the pulpit, my job is to proclaim what God's Word says, not present every different interpretation that's out there. So because I am theologically Reformed in my understanding of how God works in salvation, that's the perspective I'm going to come from because I believe that it's true. I'm not going to present a position that's Catholic or Wesleyan or Lutheran or Pentecostal because I don't share those theological convictions. I can only preach in accordance with my theological convictions.

And in doing so, I will unapologetically admit I want to convince you of the correctness of my understanding. That's my job according to Scripture. I'm to use God's Word to teach, to train, to rebuke, and to correct. If I see error in my church in terms of doctrine, I'm to strive to correct it through the preaching and teaching of Scripture. So yes, I'm going to make my case for my understanding of Scripture when I preach, especially when I recognize that this is an area of doctrine when the church might be unclear or incorrect on. I have a God-given responsibility to correct erroneous belief if I see it.

But that brings me to the second half of this statement. I need to preach what I believe the Word of God teaches...

... but not without humility.

I don't claim to know everything. I'm not infallible. Like everyone else I need to learn and grow in my understanding. I've tried to show myself open to discussion as we've gone through this. I've sought to be honest about my own struggles with the difficulties that come from what Romans 9 teaches and I've done my best to provide an opportunity for people to ask questions and talk about their concerns after the service for the past three weeks (which is once again available for any who want to come about 10 minutes or so after the service in Room 5).

Plus, as we've gone through this, I sought to listen to feedback and take it to heart. I want to be an effective pastor and so constructive criticism is valuable to me. I want to be effective in my delivery and so if I have areas where I need to grow, I'm open to hearing them. But don't complain to others about me: that won't do me any good. Come to me and let's talk about how I can be a better pastor for you.

And there's one more thing I want to say...

Finally, love must drive all we do

I preach on the hard things because I love you. I'm not trying to be mean up here. I don't get up on Sunday mornings and think, "Oh boy, I wonder how I can really tick people off today!" I'm willing to challenge you because I care about you. I want to lead you into God's truth and so I'm willing to preach on topics I know aren't easy or safe or comfortable for me or for you. Love doesn't mean always doing or saying what you like. You know that's true as parents or as friends and it's no different with pastors. Proverbs says, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." If my words wound, I'm not your enemy. I'm a friend trying to help you. I'm doing my best to love you as God would have me do through teaching and training, as well as correcting and rebuking, with God's Word.

So know that I love you. I love this church and am thankful for the opportunity to serve as your pastor. But in all things, especially in places of disagreement and conflict as I know we've experienced over the past few weeks, let love characterize us. While we can disagree on how God's sovereignty and man's choice relate to each other when it comes to salvation, one thing none of us should disagree on is the need to love and respect one another. May love and grace be the hallmarks of Grace Fellowship as we relate to each other, whether in this doctrine or in anything else we might disagree with. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2018.