

Romans 9

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[0 : 00] Romans 9. If you're new, we're going through a series in the book of Romans. And we come to Romans 9 to 11. People will tell you these are some of the most difficult chapters in all of the Bible.

Peter says, the Apostle Paul, there are many things that he wrote that are hard to understand. But I want to argue with you that Romans 9 to 11 is actually not that difficult to understand.

It's difficult to accept. I don't think, particularly in Romans 9, there's a difficulty in understanding what Paul is saying. Our problem is, we don't want to accept it.

And we don't want to accept Romans 9 because it humbles us and it puts us in our place. It reminds you and I that we're not the center of the universe. The world does not revolve around us.

That God is the center and soul of every sphere. And Romans 9 makes that point very, very strongly. How odd of God to choose the Jews.

[1 : 10] How odd of God to choose the Jews. Apparently it was a British journalist named William Norman who wrote those words many decades ago.

He wrote them in the London Daily Herald. And there was a response that came from Ogden Nash, the American poet. He wrote this. He wrote this. But not so odd as those who choose the Jewish God and hate the Jews.

You see, the Christian church has not always been blameless when it comes to anti-Semitism. We haven't got a very good track record when it comes to anti-Semitism.

And how odd for us to choose the Jewish God, to believe in the Jewish Messiah, to read the Jewish scriptures and yet to hate the Jews.

Somebody else joined in the discussion with these words. How strange of man to change the plan. And that's the real question of Romans 9 to 11. Has there been a change of plan in God?

[2 : 18] Is Christianity plan B? Has God given up on his covenant with Abraham? That was supposed to be, wasn't it? An everlasting covenant. But has God welched on the deal?

With Abraham. Why did God choose the Jews? Why is it that right down to the present day, Jews generally speaking, do not believe in their own Messiah?

And that is the problem of Romans 9 to 11. Jewish unbelief. And it might not be very high on your priority list at all. But it was a major issue for the Christians of that day.

It raises for you and I a really profound question. About the Son of God. Why are some saved and others not? Why are there, for example, literally millions of Chinese people becoming Christians right now.

And hardly anyone in the Arab world. Why are some saved and others not? Why are there some in your family, your nearest and dearest, who refuse stubbornly to acknowledge Jesus Christ?

[3 : 28] Why are some of them in your hearts? Why are some of them in your hearts? You see, Romans 9 is a question not just for our heads, but for our hearts also. And that's why Paul starts in Romans 9. Can you notice in verse 1, see his distress.

He's not just perplexed, he's distressed. It's every parent's nightmare, isn't it, for a child to go missing? It happens occasionally, we see it in the news.

And our hearts go out to those parents. We can't imagine the pain they're suffering. How would you feel if it was your child? You would do almost anything you could, wouldn't you?

And if you had any kind of suspicion that your missing child had come to any harm, your gut instinct would be, I want to swap places. I'd rather it be me than her.

Isn't that how you'd feel? Well, that's how Paul feels here about his fellow Jews. Can you see how the chapter opens? He says, I'm speaking the truth in Christ, I'm not lying. He's saying, you might not believe me, but I'm telling you the truth.

[4 : 34] My conscience confirms it. In the Holy Spirit, I have great sorrow. I've got an 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. So, when you think about your family, and those nearest and dearest who are closest to you, who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, it breaks your heart, doesn't it?

When Paul thinks about his fellow Jews, it drives him to his knees. And he's going to say a lot this morning in this chapter about the sovereignty of God.

And choosing to save some people, and not others. And some people think, well, if God is sovereign in the matter of salvation, well, whatever will be, will be.

And there's nothing I can do about it. There's no point in praying. There's no point in giving myself to telling others. But nothing could be further from the truth. Do you know the duo Penn and Teller?

[5 : 43] Penn and Teller, they are like American magicians, sort of conjurers. One of them talks, the other one doesn't. Penn is not a Christian. He's a pretty angry atheist.

Here's what he said. And I've always said, you know, that I don't respect people that don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's going to be a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell, or not getting eternal life, or whatever, and you think, well, it's not really worth telling them this, because it would make it socially awkward.

An atheist who thinks that people shouldn't proselytize, just leave me alone, keep your religion to yourself. How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize?

How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible, and not tell them that? I mean, if I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe it, that truck was bearing down on you, there's a certain point where I would tackle you.

And this is more important than that. That comes from an atheist. It is more important than that, isn't it? You see, some people come to Romans 9, and you're spoiling for a fight.

[7 : 04] And you're looking for an argument when it comes to Romans 9. But that's not how Paul writes it. His own people have rejected their Messiah, and it disturbs him deeply. He's deeply distressed.

He's profoundly moved, and so should you be. And so when we remember that the majority of our friends and family do not acknowledge Jesus Christ, and there's salvation in no other, it's got to move us to pray, hasn't it?

It's got to drive us to our knees. It would make us proselytize to tackle people. Shouldn't it? And so Paul is deeply distressed, and surely we can appreciate that dilemma.

That's the main thing I want to talk about, because who are these people? Can you see, in verse, he calls them brothers. Verse 2, verse 3.

And they're his people. They are the Jewish people. Do you remember who they are? And they're God's chosen people. And this isn't just a theological issue for Paul.

[8 : 08] It's a pastoral one and a personal one. They're God's chosen people. And so if God has chosen the Jews to be his people, and if he's made an everlasting covenant with Abraham, to be his God and the God of his children, after him down through the generations, if he's going to bless all the nations of the world through Abraham, it raises some very, very important questions when Israel don't believe.

So three questions for this morning. The first question is, has God's word failed? Has God's word failed? Look at verse 6. You think of all the privileges and advantages that God has given to Israel. Paul lists eight of them. He says there's eight privileges in being a Jew. Verses 4 and 5. The adoption of sons, the divine glory, the covenants, the law, the temple, the patriarchs, the prophets, the promises, and the Messiah.

Jesus himself was a Jew. Salvation is of the Jews. And so think of all the privileges that God has given to the Jewish people. Despite those privileges, and all the promises that God has made to them, Israel is lost, as it appears to be.

And so the question that should be with us is, how can I be sure then that I am going to be saved? It's a question of assurance. So remember two weeks ago to Romans chapter 8. Romans chapter 8 finishes and it says, can anything separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus?

[9 : 44] Romans 8 ends, doesn't it, on a really high note with lots of confidence and assurance. It says nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Our Lord. But Israel seems to be separated from the love of God.

How can I be sure that I won't be? Do you see the dilemma? As Paul goes around the Mediterranean and he goes around telling people the gospel, he always goes to the Jew first. He ends up at the synagogue first.

And door after door of synagogues were slammed in his face. What's going on? Has God's word failed? The very people that were supposed to welcome the Messiah have rejected him.

And so has God reneged on his promise? Can I trust God that he'll save me? And so do you notice what Paul does when he's got this problem?

He goes to the Bible. He opens the Bible and he searches for answers in the Bible. Look at verse 6. See what he says there? Don't suppose for one minute that God's word has failed.

[10 : 48] If that is what you think, you're not reading the Bible rightly. Because the scriptures are really clear. Just because you are born a Jew doesn't mean that you are part of one of God's chosen people.

Any more than if you are born a Presbyterian, that makes you one of God's chosen people. Any more than if you're born in a Christian country, that makes you a Christian, doesn't it?

It is a great privilege, isn't it, to have parents that taught you the Bible and prayed for you. But that doesn't make you a believer. It's never been like that.

It has always been a matter of choice and a matter of faith. And God's choice, it's always been a matter of grace and not race.

And he proves it to us with these case studies. So look with me, Isaac and Ishmael, verses 6 to 9.

So Jews and Muslims trace their roots back to Ishmael and Isaac. Both were sons of Abraham.

[11 : 54] But God chose Isaac and not Ishmael to be the child of the promise. Look at what it says. He says there, doesn't he?

For this is what the promise, about verse 9, 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.

We're going to get on to that. I'm running ahead of myself. But you see this issue with Ishmael and Isaac. Now do you remember the remarkable story of Isaac's birth?

It's almost as unbelievable as the story of the virgin birth. The promise was given to Abraham, Abraham, you'll have a son. He's in his mid-70s and he goes on and on and on. And Abraham and Sarah grow older and it seems like it's never going to happen.

And so Abraham, do you remember, he takes things into his own hands and he tries to force things. And he had a child through Abraham's, Sarah's home help, Hagar, and Ishmael is born.

[13 : 13] It's a massive mistake. It always is when you take things into your own hands. And so they had to wait for the promise to be fulfilled.

And then just when it looked like it was never going to happen, Isaac is born to a pair of geriatrics. It was a supernatural birth. In fact, Isaac's name means laughter because it's a joke, isn't it?

That's the way God's works. God takes the foolish things, the weak things, the things that are not, and he does the impossible. And that is how he came into this world, do you remember?

He came into this world through the womb of the Virgin Mary. It's impossible. So has God's word failed? That's the question he's answering from the Bible. No, it hasn't because God never said that every single son of Abraham would believe.

It's always been grace and not race. It is those who believe the promise who are saved in the Old Testament. They are the true Israel. The Israel within Israel.

[14 : 16] And just to put it beyond doubt, he tells us about Jacob and Esau. And he reminds us that God chose Jacob and he did not choose Esau.

Again, do you see what's happening? It's a choice, isn't it? It's God's choice in verses 12 and 13. Not that I did choose you for that could never be. My heart would still refuse you if you'd not chosen me.

It's always been like that. And in verses 10 to 13, he reminds us that God chose Jacob and Esau, not Esau, not because one of them was any better than the other.

They were twins. They shared the same father, just like Isaac and Ishmael did. They shared not only the same father, but also the same mother.

They shared the same womb. They were probably conceived in the same act of sexual intercourse. There's absolutely nothing to decide between them. And yet we're told before they were born, before they had a chance to do anything good or anything bad, God told Rebekah the older will serve the younger.

[15:26] He chose Jacob over Esau. And then to really ram it home, to really kind of make it crystal clear, Paul quotes the prophecy of Malachi, doesn't he, in verse 13.

And he says, Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated. I think that's a Hebrew idiom. I think he's saying that you've always got to choose.

Like when Jesus says, if anybody comes to me and does not hate his father or mother, he's not telling you to hate your parents. He's saying there you have to choose what comes first in your life. If you want to be a follower of mine, Jesus has to come first in your life. Before anyone else, before any other relationship, Jesus has to take priority. We have to choose.

That's what it's saying. And God chose to save Jacob and to pass over Egypt, Esau. Why? Why did he do that?

[16:25] I don't know. Why are you a Christian and your brother or your sister isn't? Have you ever asked that question? Was Jacob any better than Esau?

Far from it. If I was going to hang out with the two of them for the afternoon and I had to choose one of them, you choose Esau far more than you choose Jacob. Esau was a man's man.

Jacob's a man. He's a spoiled brat. There's nothing lovable about Jacob. He's a cheat. He's a deceiver. He's obnoxious. The really surprising thing is not that God hated Esau but that he loved Jacob.

Because there's nothing lovable about Jacob at all. And let's face it, there's nothing lovable about you or me. Do you remember Maria's song in the Sound of Music?

When Captain Von Trapp proposes to her, she says this, doesn't she? She says, somewhere in my lifetime, I must have done something good. No, you didn't.

[17:34] That is not why God chose you. It's not why God chose Isaac. It's not why God chose Jacob. There is nothing good in any of us. Isn't that the teaching of Romans? Stick in four chapters to tell you that there is no one who does good.

No, not one. There is none righteous. No, not one. It wasn't that God saw in you the propensity to believe. No, he didn't.

You are a believer this morning. If you have faith this morning, it is because God has given that to you. And it is all of his grace. Jews and Gentiles alike, we are all dead in our trespasses and sins and God saves us and he rescues us by his grace.

Look at what he says in verse 16. He says that it does not depend on man's desire or man's effort. It is grace, not race. It is faith, not physical descent.

And of course, that gives rise to the second question, isn't it? The second question is this. Is it fair? Has God's word failed? No. Is it fair? And Paul anticipates that in verse 14.

[18:46] Was God unfair? Is it fair for God to choose some people in this way? Choosing some and passing others by? Is it fair that God chose Isaac and not Ishmael?

Is it fair that God chose Jacob and not Esau? Is it fair that millions of Chinese people are coming into the kingdom now? And in the Arab world, there are hardly any conversions? Is that fair?

Is it fair that you are a Christian and nobody else in your family is? What then should we say?

Should we say, well, is God unjust? Not at all, says Paul. He quotes God's word to Moses in verse 15, and he answers the question.

I've told you the story before about the aging film star who goes to the hairdressers to get her hair done. And she says to the young man who's cutting the hair, she says, I hope you're going to do me justice.

To which the hairdresser said, madam, it's not justice you need, but mercy. And that's Paul's point here. Look at verse 15, he quotes God's word to Moses.

[19:57] It's the episode of the golden calf. And at that very moment, God is entering into covenant with Moses at the top of the mountain. At that very moment when that's happening, God's people down the bottom of the mountain jump into bed with the best man.

They worship a golden calf. And you think at that point, God, why don't you just wipe them off the face of the earth? That's what they deserve, don't they? And God says to Moses this, he says, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.

I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy. And I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. William Shedd preached a sermon on that entitled this, The exercise of mercy is optional with God.

That's the very meaning of mercy. It's not that we've got a right to mercy. It's not something that you can expect.

It's not something that you can demand. It's always at God's discretion. So let's think of a rich man who decides to sponsor some inner city kids.

[21 : 09] He decides to give some inner city kids a decent education and he guarantees to them full kind of university education for 20 of them. Is that fair?

Is that fair? Fair has got nothing to do with it. There are hundreds of street kids out there living in inner cities and he's only going to sponsor 20 of them.

Is that fair? Well, he didn't have to sponsor any of them. Is that fair? It's got nothing to do with fairness. It's to do with kindness.

It's to do with mercy. He's under no obligation to help any of those children. But the fact that he does, it's got nothing to do with fairness. It's sheer mercy. mercy. And if you want God to be fair to you, you've had it.

It's all over. If you want God to deal with you as you deserve, that is very, very bad news. Because it's not justice that you need, it's mercy.

[22 : 14] And it's kindness, and it's compassion. You see, it's grace, not race. it's faith, not physical descent. It's mercy, not merit.

And again, Paul proves that to us by taking us to the Bible. He goes to Pharaoh. It's a really interesting episode, isn't it? Chapter 7 to 14 of Exodus. The showdown between God and Pharaoh. And do you remember how many plagues were there? How many plagues children were there? There were ten, weren't there? Ten plagues. Surely it didn't take God ten rounds to knock out Pharaoh.

This little tin pot God. Why didn't God just get rid of him? Why were there ten plagues? And the answer is this, isn't it? That God was displaying his power to the nations.

But God is showing his patience. He's revealing his character. He's making himself known. So listen to what he says in verse 17. He says, I raised you up, Pharaoh, for this very purpose that I might display my power.

[23 : 19] in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. And at the same time, God is making a name for himself amongst all the nations of the earth. He's also dealing with this man, Pharaoh.

He's patiently giving Pharaoh space for repentance. In Exodus, ten times it says, God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

heart. But you also know that there's an echo in Exodus, don't you? It says, Pharaoh hardened his own heart. And so God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

And the two things fit together. The sovereignty of God and human responsibility. They always go side by side. Both are true. You can't quarrel with the justice of this, you see, when God hardens people's hearts.

What he's doing is what he told us in Romans chapter 1. He is just giving them over to what they want to do. The wrath of God is being revealed and he gives people over to do what they want to do.

[24 : 31] And so when God hardens, he is simply solidifying what is already there. And so here's the shocking thought for this morning. There is no one in hell who doesn't want to be there.

They might regret it when they get there, but that is where they wanted to be. And that is the scary thing about hell. It's not like the London dungeon or Dante's Inferno or demons with pitchforks.

It's much scary. It's much closer to home. You see, people don't stumble into hell unawares. you put yourself there.

And that's what Pharaoh was doing. Pharaoh was swept into hell, not against his will. Pharaoh was swept into hell by the choices he made. He hardened his heart. And God dealt with him and God pled with him and God was giving him space to change his mind.

Let my people go. Let my people go. And again and again, Pharaoh just went on hardening his heart. John Stott said this, if anyone is lost, the blame is theirs.

[25 : 42] If anyone is saved, the credit is God's. Do you follow that logic? It's not hard to understand. It's very hard to accept.

It's grace, not race. It's faith, not physical descent. It's mercy, not merit. If you are sitting here this morning and you want God to be fair to you, then nobody will be saved.

Because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And there is none that does right. No, not one. Jew and Gentile are all in the same boat. We need mercy, not justice.

And that brings me to the third point. And the third point is what always crops up when you look at this passage. And the third question is this, well, what about free will? Aren't we just robots? Automatons or whatever it is.

What about free will? And Paul again anticipates the question and look what he says in verse 19. You say to me then, why does he still find fault?

[26 : 51] For who can resist his will? If the big decisions are already made, what say do I have? What has happened to free will? And so let me talk to you about the question of free will.

The big issue is, when people talk to me about free will, the question that I always ask is this, who's free will? Who are you talking about? Are you talking about yours or God's? will? The big question is this, not do I have free will, but does God? Does God have free will? Is God free to do whatever he pleases?

Or to put it another way, does the world revolve around you? Most people think, don't they, that they are the center and the soul of every sphere. They may not admit that, but that's how they live.

Are you the center of everything or does it revolve around God? You know, don't you, that people used to believe that the sun and the stars and the moon and the earth, all revolved around the earth.

[27 : 58] And then Copernicus discovered that the earth actually revolves around the sun. And in today, today's church, we need a Copernican revolution.

I remember seeing once a cartoon of Jonathan Edwards, he was preaching his famous sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.

It's a really famous sermon. Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. But the caption on the cartoon read, God in the Hands of Angry Sinners. And that's where we are today in the church, isn't it?

So God is answerable to us. If he doesn't answer my prayers, well I'll call him to account. He's there for me, he's there to massage my ego, to make my life better.

That's modern day Christianity. And Paul says, no, no, no. You need to realize that God is sovereign. And that God has free will. And that God can do whatever he pleases and God doesn't have to explain himself to me or you.

[29 : 01] So verse 20, can you see it? Who are you, oh man, to talk back to God? Who are you, oh man? Who do you think you are? Are you going to tell God how to organize his world? You and I are just a lump of clay.

And clay doesn't talk back to the fingers, does it, that mold it and say, well, why did you shape me like this? The potter can do whatever he likes with the clay. Look at verses 21 to 24. Verse 21.

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. Don't misunderstand this, this is creation. He's saying we are made out of clay.

We are sinful people. And doesn't the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

Eugene Peterson in the message says, the potter has a perfect right to shape one lump of clay into a vase for holding flowers and another one into a pot for cooking beans.

[30 : 13] And this is the argument he goes on to say, 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? Who are the objects of God's wrath prepared for destruction?

You are. I am. We are children of wrath. Pharaoh was. What if God choosing to show his wrath and make his power known has endured with much patience.

You're still alive this morning. You're still listening just about. You may not be a Christian yet but you're still breathing. And there's still hope for you because God is patient.

He is slow to anger. What if God choosing to show verse 23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy which he has prepared in advance beforehand for glory.

even us whom he's called not from the Jews only but of Gentiles. You see whether it's the Pharaoh of Egypt or a fundamentalist atheist like Richard Dawkins hardening his heart against God doesn't it make you marvel at the patience of God?

[31 : 39] Why doesn't God just zap him? Why doesn't God just unfriend him? Why doesn't God just blot him out? Why doesn't he wipe off the face of the earth Pharaoh or Richard Dawkins?

Because he is slow to anger rich in mercy and he holds back his wrath and he makes the riches of his glory known to us. Do you find it hard to understand?

Well you're in good company. Peter struggled with it too. He said in his second letter there's lots of things Paul writes which are difficult to understand. I think he's saying Romans 9.

And then he says bear in mind this that our Lord's patience means salvation. Don't distort Paul's teaching. Don't twist it to your own destruction.

Do not presume on the patience of God. Don't say if God is sovereign whatever will be will be. Don't presume on the patience of God. And don't say if God is sovereign well I can't be held accountable.

[32 : 45] He will hold you to account just as he did with Pharaoh. So has God's word failed? Has he welched on his deal to Abraham? Not at all. Remember he promised Abraham I will multiply your descendants as the stars in heaven and the sand on the seashore.

In your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed. And isn't exactly that's what he's doing right now? That's what he wants Roman Christians to see.

to the Roman church. He wants to make it the head quarter for world evangelization. Do you realize that there are more people alive today than have ever lived before?

It's difficult to carry your head around, but there are more people alive today than have ever lived before. God's word is still powerful and it's still active. There are more Christians in China than there are members of the Communist Party.

God's word is still powerful and people are still being saved today. The gospel that was preached to Abraham is still being preached. The elect whom God has chosen from before the foundation of the world are still being gathered together.

[33 : 57] Look at verse 24. Even us whom he has called, not from Jews only, but also from Gentiles.

As indeed he says in Hosea, those who are not my people, I will call my people. And her who was not beloved, I will call beloved. In the very place where it was said to them, you are not my people, they will be called sons of the living God.

Can you see that? God? It's saying even the descendants of Ishmael. Amongst the very people and the places where I said they're not my people, they'll be called sons of the living God.

God's word hasn't failed. And through the preaching of the gospel, he's going to give to Abraham more children that can be numbered.

What about the descendants of Pharaoh? Egypt is going to be evangelized. Japanese people, Persian people, English people.

[35 : 00] God is rich in compassion and full of mercy. He's kept his promise. His word is still going out to the nations. He isn't finished with his people. We'll see that. There is, as Isaiah says in verse 29, there's a remnant.

So how do we respond to all this? How do we respond? Let me close with this. Look at verse 5. Look at who Jesus is.

Who is Jesus? He's a Jew. Who is Jesus? He's the one who the prophets pointed to. Who is Jesus? He's the one about the whole temple structure was set up to tell us about. He's the priest. He's the sacrifice.

Who is Jesus? Verse 5, he's God over all. And so perhaps this morning, you're very unsure about yourself. Perhaps you're really unsure whether you are one of God's elect.

Has God chosen me? How can I be sure? Make sure. Make sure by looking to Jesus Christ. Calvin said Christ is the mirror of our election.

[36 : 07] Don't look anywhere else except into that mirror. Don't look into yourself. Don't check your spiritual pulse. look away from yourself and away from your feelings and your emotions and your ups and downs and look to Christ and his finished work on the cross.

Don't look at your track record. Don't look at your family connections. Long before you were born, before you done anything good or bad, God chose to set his love upon you in Christ.

Delight yourself in him. those of us who are concerned this morning about loved ones and those who do not trust in Jesus for themselves, we do not give up.

Paul didn't give up on the people that he loved. How do I know if my daughter or my son-in-law or my husband or my wife or my parents are one of God's elect? How do I know?

You don't know. It's a mystery. And so don't puzzle over what you don't understand. It's not for us to know who the elect are and how many there are.

[37 : 16] But what we do know is that there are more there than can be numbered because God is rich in mercy. And he loves to work down the generations. And he loves to work in families.

So keep praying for your loved ones. The doctrine of election drives us to our knees. And he pleads with God for his people to save his people.

And so pray and praise God for what you do understand. Praise him for Jesus. Praise him for sending Jesus into the world to be the saviour of the world. And delight yourself in him.

May Jesus Christ be praised. Let's sing. Let's sing.