

Romans 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 9 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, 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 Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born, and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works, but because of him who calls.

She was told, The older will serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?

By no means. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy.

[1 : 42] For the scripture says to Pharaoh, For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

You will say to me then, Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will? But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, 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 honourable use and another for dishonourable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles?

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

And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.

[3 : 07] And, as Isaiah predicted, If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah. What shall we say then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith, but that Israel, who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness, did not succeed in reaching that law.

Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

Many people have read Romans chapter 9 and following as a sort of appendix to the main body of Romans. Romans 1 to 8 are about the way of salvation. Then in Romans 9, Paul teaches about the doctrine of election and then gets into the question of the status of Israel.

While popular in some quarters, this is quite a mistaken understanding of Romans. If we have been paying attention, it will be clear that the issues addressed in Romans chapter 9 to 11 are absolutely integral to the letter.

In fact, a reasonable case could be made that these are the most important chapters for Paul's argument in the epistle. Here it is important to remember that the epistle is in many ways more focused upon God's problem and God's solution to that than upon man's problem and God's solution to that.

[4 : 34] What do we mean by this? God has to be both just and the justifier. He has to deal appropriately with sin and maintain moral order in his universe. However, he also desires to deliver human beings from sin and put them in right standing with himself.

He needs to keep the promises that he has made to Israel. At the heart of the book of Romans is not an account of how individuals can get right with a holy God, although Romans clearly addresses those problems.

Rather, Romans is about how, in the fullness of time in history, God revealed his saving justice by which sinful people can be put in good standing with him. How that good standing is not a mere fiction, but is according to truth, being in keeping with judgment according to works on the last day.

It is about how this new people in Christ fulfills the great purpose that God had from the beginning and will involve the renewal of all creation. However, there is one great big glaring problem, and that's Israel.

Israel has, for the most part, not responded positively to the gospel. Indeed, they have generally rejected Christ. Yet Israel received so many blessings and promises from God, it seems as if God has failed in their case.

[5 : 47] And if that is the case, everything else is thrown into question. If Messiah Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel, then how are we to explain this?

This is a profoundly personal matter for Paul too. He is in very great distress about the state of Israel. They're his own compatriots. He even goes to the extent of, like Moses in the book of Exodus, expressing the desire that he be cut off in order that they might be saved.

He enumerates all of the blessings of Israel, ending with the greatest of all. From Israel, according to the flesh, came the Messiah, Jesus. There is also likely an exceptionally remarkable statement here concerning Jesus.

Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. If this is the right way of understanding Paul's statement, and there is debate on this point, it is a direct statement of the deity of the Messiah Jesus.

However, it occurs in a context that heightens the irony. God himself took Israelite flesh, and yet Israel have failed to receive him. In response to this, Paul retells the story of Israel, in order that we can understand what is happening at this juncture in history.

[6 : 57] Though many have missed the fact, most of Paul's thought is about exploring the meaning of history, how to articulate the events of history in a meaningful narrative that gives us the means by which to move forward in an appropriate manner.

At this juncture of history, following the Christ event, how do we understand that Israel has largely rejected the gospel, whereas the Gentiles have accepted it in large numbers? How do we account for this against the background of God's covenant purpose and promise for his people of Israel?

This would seem to be incongruous with God's intent to save his people. It would seem to go against the purpose of the covenant. In response to this, then, Paul tells the story in a way that highlights, for instance, that the Gentiles who had not been seeking God are nonetheless fitting recipients of God's mercy.

That this is in keeping with how Israel always was constituted, by an act of pure grace, not on the basis of anything that might mark them out as deserving recipients. Now, this is not just a matter of works.

It could be a matter of ancestry, or it could be a matter of some other factor, some standing or worth, that people could claim before God. Paul is reading the story of Genesis at this point, and then he moves on to the story of Exodus and elsewhere, but he retells the story in a way that shows that Israel was never established on the basis of its works or its worth, of its keeping of the law, or of its being marked out as the people of the law.

[8 : 22] What he is talking about here is not primarily earning salvation through merit, although that is an implication of it. Rather, he is challenging anything that might mark anyone out as a fitting recipient of God's grace.

For instance, whether it is birth, or being born to a particular father. Isaac was the one through whom God would call Abraham's seed, not Ishmael. So it is not about birth.

Mere descent from Abraham or Israel was never the fundamental basis of Israel's identity as a people. Well, what about the fact of works, and the way that you are an observant keeper of the law?

Well, we can see the story of Jacob and Esau. Why did God choose Jacob over Esau? God says, Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated. Yet this occurs even within the womb itself, before any actions have been performed.

God chose Jacob over Esau and said that the older should serve the younger. At each point in Israel's history, Israel was constituted on the basis of grace and of divine election, of a divine election that was not conditioned upon anything that was done by the human actors.

[9 : 27] Now, as we read through the story of Genesis, we should recognize this. This is what we see in the story itself. Why did God choose Isaac rather than Ishmael? Not on the basis of anything that either of them did.

Rather, it was divine purpose. It was divine election. It was not based on the choice or the actions of the participants involved. It was God. Why was Jacob chosen over Esau?

Not because Jacob did anything that earned that, because the choice happened before either of them was born. Nor was it on the basis of the natural status enjoyed by the older, because Jacob was chosen rather than Esau.

Later on, we will see that choice reaffirmed, and it is something that is manifest also in Esau's despising of the covenant, and those sorts of things. But that is not the basis for it.

It is not that God saw Esau's wickedness and then decided to cut him off from the covenant. Rather, God's purpose all along was that Jacob should be the one through whom the covenant line would be established.

[10 : 24] And so the very origins of Israel were established by an unconditioned series of actions of divine grace. This is the way that God forms his people. And we should notice the asymmetries as we go through this.

This is about God's positive action of grace. It is not that there is a symmetrical action of grace and a sort of anti-grace of violent rejection and reprobation. This is not a double decree in the way that would make one decree symmetrical with the other.

And the other thing to notice here is that this is not about salvation primarily. This is about God's covenant purpose of forming his people. In the new covenant, we see that it is far more about salvation, because it is the means by which God is blessing and bringing in all peoples.

Whereas in the past, this was restricted to Israel. You did not have to be a member of Israel, though, to be saved. There is no reason to believe that Ishmael was damned on account of his not being chosen, for instance.

Indeed, there are reasons why we might think that he was indeed saved. The issue here, though, is who is going to bear the covenant destiny and promise? Who will hold the covenant baton as it's passed down through history?

[11 : 31] And God always formed his people through an act of unconditioned grace. As we read through the story, it continues. So it goes beyond Esau and Jacob and into the story of the Exodus.

He says to Moses, I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion. So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

Notice again that there is an asymmetry here. It talks about God's choice of mercy, his exercising of mercy and compassion. It does not speak about God choosing to exercise a violent rejection of people.

The word for hated in the story of Esau need not bear the weight of violent rejection and animosity. Although that element may appear later on as the story develops, it just means that God chose or preferred Jacob over Esau in the sense that he chose him rather than Esau.

We see a similar thing in the story of Rachel and Leah. Leah is hated and Rachel is loved. This does not mean that Leah is violently and viscerally disliked. It might involve a dislike, but that is not primarily what the words mean in that context.

[12 : 37] The point here then is that God is acting through the unconditioned act of mercy upon people who are unworthy of it. God's action in grace is always to unworthy recipients.

There is no need for God to justify himself in this way. God is not in the position of having to justify himself. He is exercising pure grace, unconditioned grace, undeserved favour towards people, none of whom are worthy recipients, and all of whom are formed as a people purely out of God's goodness and undeserved favour.

Remember, this is the formation of a people, not just the choice of detached individuals. Paul's point here is to discuss the way that God forms his people in history, so that the Romans can better understand why the Gentiles can be brought in, in a way that is in keeping with the way that God always works, and then also how Israel's stumbling can be made to fit in to the larger story of how God works in history.

Abraham, Esau, Jacob, Isaac, Ishmael, these are not just odd individuals who happen to be believers or unbelievers. No, they are the people through whom God was shaping, at its very origins, his people.

The choice of Isaac over Ishmael was not just the choice of an individual, it was the choice of a people. It was the choice of the descendants of Isaac, rather than those of Ishmael. In the same way with Esau and Jacob, it is not that God was choosing this one individual over another individual primarily.

[14 : 02] It was God determining how he was going to form his people over history. What sort of people was he going to create? It's the moulding of a people. Notice also that election, as it is described in this chapter, is something that happens in history.

The choice of Jacob was declared while he was in the womb. It's not the same thing as an election in eternity past. God's sovereignty is exercised in history, throughout Israel's history.

And this is a point that Paul supports by retelling the story also of the Exodus. In the story of the Exodus, the truth of God's sovereignty is addressed to Pharaoh. For the same purpose I have raised you up, that I may show my power in you, and that my name may be declared in all the earth.

Within the story of the Exodus then, God raises Pharaoh up. This is not the same thing as God making Pharaoh sinful. For instance, in the story of Job, Job is attacked by people around him, and all his people are killed, and we have other disasters that befall him.

It is not, however, as if the people around him were very favourably inclined to Job, and that Job was in this situation where all his neighbours were praying for him, and wishing him well, and seeking his good, and then suddenly they just randomly turned on him.

[15 : 14] No, it says that God had created a hedge around him, protecting him. In the same way, when we think about someone being raised up or hardened, when we look at the story of the Exodus, we see that on the one hand, God hardens, and on the other hand, Pharaoh hardened himself.

It's a fitting way to see things. It recognises the integrity of secondary causation, that God's causation is not in competition with human causation, and particularly when it comes to sin, God is not the author of sin.

When we read the story of Pharaoh, Pharaoh hardens himself, but as he hardens himself, God is hardening him as well. Indeed, on many of the occasions when it talks about hardening, it's rather God giving him the power and strength of will, so that he can take his stand.

God's sovereign direction of Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart, are not in competition with each other. Pharaoh is raised up in order to show God's glory, that God, in the act of the Exodus, might demonstrate his power over the false gods and rulers of the Egyptians, and deliver his people from the house of bondage.

And to do that, he gives, as it were, free reign to the sin in Pharaoh's life. Indeed, he empowers Pharaoh's will, in order that Pharaoh can stand even more surely in his rebellion. He allows him to rise to a fuller stature, in order that he might be broken down.

[16 : 32] Paul writes, Therefore he has mercy on whom he wills, and whom he wills he hardens. You will say to me then, Why does he still find fault? For who has resisted his will? And Paul responds to this with the idea, or the illustration, of the potter and the clay, something that we find in the Old Testament.

The potter and the clay is an important image to attend to. It is not that God creates a blank slate, and then writes on it whatever he wills. The potter-clay image is an image of movement between the potter and the clay.

God is shaping real entities in history, real people and real people groups. So, whether he is shaping Pharaoh as a part of the Exodus, whether he is shaping his people through the choice of Isaac, and the choice of Jacob over Esau, this is God forming his pottery, as it were, forming his people over history.

And as he forms that people, it is being made into a vessel for his glory. And on the other hand, we have vessels of honour, and vessels for dishonour. Paul raises a hypothetical question at this point.

What if God, wanting to show his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

[17 : 50] What is Paul saying here? He is returning to the situation at this moment in time and raising a hypothetical question. What if God, as in the situation of the Exodus, with the design of saving and delivering his people, is allowing the vessels of wrath to exist, and enjoying with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, that he might make known the riches of his glory to the vessels of mercy?

We should recognise a number of things about this. First of all, enduring the vessels of wrath is for the sake of the salvation of the vessels of mercy. It is for the sake of grace that God endures with the vessels of wrath.

Likewise, God is not seen as preparing those to the same degree as the others. Those vessels of wrath are hardened, and they are hardened not necessarily through pure divine action upon them.

They can be hardened through their own work as well. As we read this, we should read it recognising that the background is unbelieving Israel, and their rejection of and resistance to the gospel. What is the purpose of that?

Paul is raising the hypothetical possibility that this is perhaps happening in order that God might demonstrate his power. They are being fitted for destruction, a destruction that ultimately comes in AD 70, as Israel is judged and Jerusalem and its temple are destroyed in God's judgement.

[19 : 05] That event is the means by which God makes his power known. These vessels of wrath fitted for destruction are not necessarily about vessels of wrath from all eternity, fitted for wrath in hell.

Again, it's a historical account. It's about God fitting particular people for destruction within history for a historical judgement. Israel has rejected Christ.

They rejected Christ in his initial mission, and now they have not just rejected the Son of Man, but have rejected the Spirit given at Pentecost that bears witness to the risen Christ. As a result, much of that particular generation will be destroyed.

However, God is currently bearing with them with long-suffering in order that he might save his people at this moment in time. And that bearing with them with long-suffering ultimately leads to bringing in many Jews and Gentiles.

These are the people that God has called. This new people is led by the Spirit, the people that he has spoken about in chapter 8. And then again, he looks back to the Old Testament story of Hosea.

[20 : 04] I will call them my people who are not my people, and her beloved who was not beloved. And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, you are not my people. There they shall be called sons of the living God.

Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel. Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved, for he will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness, because the Lord will make a short work upon the earth.

In these references to the Old Testament, Paul is once again showing that this is about the way that God has always done things. The way that God called and established his people at the beginning is the way that he is doing things now in bringing Gentiles in, apart from natural status, works, or ancestry.

God called Abraham as if from nothing. God formed Isaac through bringing life to a dead womb and preparing Abraham to bear a seed. None of this is on the basis of merit, on the basis of worth, on the basis of being a fitting recipient of God's mercy.

One could imagine certain Israelites protesting, We have the temple, we practice circumcision, we keep the law, we are a people who are marked out by the covenant, we have all these covenant signs, but in themselves, these do not make them fitting recipients of God's grace.

