

Paul's sorrow and anguish over Israel

Romans 9

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We are starting a sort of new sermon series today.  
Over the next three weeks we'll be looking at Romans 9-11.  
It's a sort of new sermon series  
because we actually looked at Romans 1-4 two years ago  
and Romans 5-8 last year.  
So we are continuing what we have already started.  
Many times people have done sermon series on Romans  
and just covered chapters 1-8.  
That's because these chapters lay out the glorious gospel message.  
They are the most full treatment of the gospel in Bible.  
And so when the gospel has been fully declared,  
they move on to something else.  
But Paul wrote the whole letter for a reason.  
So we're going to look at 9-11 this year.  
And we'll finish it off next year.

But given that it's been a while,  
I might give you a refresher on the story so far.  
In chapters 1-3, Paul shows how all of humanity alike is captured by sin.  
We are subject to God's judgement.  
3:23 "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."  
Then at the end of chapter 3,  
he shows how we can be made right in God's sight  
through faith in Jesus Christ and faith in Jesus Christ alone.  
In chapter 4  
he shows us that faith was always the way to become part of God's people  
and obtain God's righteousness.  
In chapters 5 to 8, he shows us that when we obtain God's righteousness,

then it flows from that that we also obtain peace with God,  
reconciliation, we are saved from God's wrath,  
and we are adopted as his children.

And as his children, God is remaking us in the image of the Lord Jesus.

Rom 8:29 "For those God foreknew,  
he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,  
that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters."  
That is the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

What more is there to say?

Well it turns out that there is quite a lot more to say.

Romans has 16 chapters so Paul is only half finished.

In chapters 9 to 11 he addresses the question of God's promises to Israel.

Basically, if all that he's said in the first 8 chapters is true,  
that anyone, Jew or Gentile can be justified by faith in Jesus,  
then where does that leave the earlier promises God made to Israel?

Now you may well gain an inkling  
of why the sermon series often stop at chapter 8.

We are not Israel.

So these three chapters are not directly relevant to us.

So why look at them?

That's how the reasoning goes.

But they are relevant to us,

because they tell us about God's faithfulness to his promises.

And God has made promises to us.

So we'd want to be sure he is going to be faithful to them.

And actually the issues for Paul

are not that distant from issues that many of us face.

Let me explain.

The question of what happens to Israel is for Paul  
a question of profound personal pain.

Listen to him.

9:2-3 "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, those of my own race, the people of Israel."

Paul sees around him many Jews who are not going to be saved on judgement day, and it makes him want to weep.

These are people who are the recipients of God's promises and yet they oppose God's Son and will come under God's judgement.

These are Paul's friends.

They are people he lived and worked amongst before Jesus met him on the road to Damascus.

And it pains him greatly to see them missing out on God's salvation.

And many of us are in a similar situation.

Some of you have a husband or wife who has not come to faith.

Some of you have children or grandchildren who have not come to faith.

Paul's pain is your pain.

But it's not only a question of profound personal pain.

It's also a pressing pastoral problem.

Have God's promises failed?

And if they have, what of the promises that Christians trust in, might they too be on shaky ground?

Listen to Paul again.

9:4-5 "Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory; the covenants; the receiving of the Law, the temple worship and the promises.

Theirs are the patriarchs,

and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."

All that stuff was given to Israel.

If it has failed,

then might Jesus fail us?

Again, Paul's problem is not dissimilar to a problem you might face.

Some people have children who they had baptised as babies.

They have faithfully brought them up in the church.

They feel like there is a promise of God there  
that these dear ones should be spiritually safe.

And yet they have walked away.

They are not living for Jesus.

Has God's promise failed?

Paul's answer is an emphatic 'No'.

God's promises never fail.

People do sometimes misunderstand God's promises

and think they are promised something that they are not in fact promised.

Does God's Word promise

that the spouse of a believer is going to be saved on the last day  
even if they don't come to faith themselves

by virtue of the faith of their spouse?

No it doesn't.

That's a misreading of 1 Cor 7.

Does God's Word promise that if you baptise your kids  
and bring them up in the church,

that they will necessarily be saved on the last day?

No it doesn't.

That is a misreading of the book of Proverbs.

This is what Paul says.

9:6-7 "It is not as though God's Word as failed.

For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.

Nor because they are his descendents are they all Abraham's children."

This is quite hard to understand but it's crucial.

Not everyone who is part of the nation of Israel  
is an inheritor of the promises made by God to Israel.  
That is, the promises made by God to the nation of Israel  
only apply to those who put their faith in God's promises.  
Across Israel's history that counts an awful lot of people out.  
The Jews who worshipped Baal did not put their faith in God.  
They are not part of Israel in the spiritual sense.  
Not all who are descended from Israel  
that is Jacob, the father of the nation,  
are spiritually Israel,  
that is, recipients of the promises made to Israel.  
And in particular, those Jews of Paul's day  
who fail to receive Jesus as Israel's Messiah  
are not recipients of the promises.  
Despite the fact they live in Jerusalem  
and obey the food laws and all the rest of it,  
they are not Israel.

Paul explains  
that the Jews should have been aware of this from the book of Genesis.  
Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac.  
Ishmael was born to his wife, Sarah's, slave girl  
when they got impatient waiting for God to give Sarah the promised son.  
Isaac was born to Sarah.  
Only Isaac was an inheritor of the promise.  
Only Isaac's descendents were Israel.  
Ishmael's descendents became the Arabs of today.

Isaac himself had two son, Esau and Jacob.  
Only Jacob, who was later renamed Israel,  
would have children that were Israel.  
Esau's children became the nation of Edom.

They were Edomites not Israelites.  
By physical ancestry they were descended from Abraham  
but they were not Israel.  
And this happened by God's choice.  
God told their mother that the older would serve the younger  
even while they were in the womb.  
It was God's election,  
God's choice.  
Babies can't have done anything to merit God's choice  
when they are in the womb.  
Not by merit but by God's choice.

Now lots of people when they hear about it being God's choice  
feel that it's not fair.  
It all seems rather arbitrary.  
Jacob got chosen Esau did not.  
How can that be fair?  
Well it's not just people in the 21st century who ask that question.  
That's exactly where Paul goes next.  
9:14 "What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!"

Paul goes on to explain it from the story of Israel and Pharaoh.  
But it's worth pausing for a moment on Esau  
and thinking about the issue of fairness.  
When we just look at what was said to Rachel  
while her twins were in the womb,  
it's understandable that we might raise the issue of fairness.  
Jacob was the chosen twin before they were born.  
He was elected by God.  
Harry Potter is not the chosen one.  
Jacob is.  
But in the Bible,

God's sovereignty never displaces human responsibility.  
It's hard to get your head around.  
And I'm not sure my head is fully around it.  
But just because God is sovereign in choosing us,  
we are still responsible for our actions before God.  
So in Esau's case,  
he sold his birthright as the firstborn for a bowl of soup  
when he was hungry.  
Esau is responsible for his action.  
He did it willingly.  
And his descendents are not Israel because of his choice  
at the same time as they are not Israel because of God's election.  
Both things are true at once.  
Anyone who explains God's election to you  
in such a way that it erases human responsibility  
is not being faithful to the Bible.  
And anyone who explains human responsibility to you  
in such a way as it erases God's predestination  
is also not being faithful to the Bible.

What does Paul say about it?

9:15 "For God says to Moses,

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,  
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.""

Again when you hear that it sounds quite arbitrary.

As if God is saying,

'I can do whatever I like and you can't do anything about it.'

Like a feral teenager

who knows that the teachers have no power to do any real discipline.

But the focus is never on who gets left out of God's mercy.

As if everyone deserves God's mercy

but because God likes playing favourites only some people get chosen.

When does God say that to Moses?  
It's straight after the incident with the golden calf.  
The whole nation deserves God's punishment.  
They richly deserve God's punishment.  
Five minutes after the most dramatic rescue from slavery in Egypt  
they are bowing down and worshiping an idol.  
Every single one of them except Moses.  
So when God says,  
"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,  
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."  
The focus is on how incredible it is that anyone receives mercy.  
Those who miss out on mercy are just getting what they deserve.  
The wonder is that anyone receives mercy.  
And that's how it is for us, friends!

Many people today  
think they have some kind of religious right to God's mercy.  
God ought to be merciful to me,  
I've volunteered with the CFA.  
God ought to be merciful to me,  
I cleaned up my kids' vomit when they were sick.  
I'm a good bloke, ok.  
We have no rights to God's mercy.  
We are all Israel bowing to the golden calf.  
And if God has mercy on some of us,  
then it's a wondrous thing.  
And God chooses who he has mercy on.  
And it's completely and utterly his right to choose  
because none of us deserve it.

It's like the rich and entitled lady who was getting her portrait painted  
and she said to the artist,



"You will do me justice, I hope."  
And the artist replied,  
"It's not justice you need madam, it's mercy."

Don't ask God to be fair.  
That would be a disaster for all of us.  
You want God to be fair,  
Pharaoh found out what that looks like.  
9:17-18 "For Scripture says to 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.""  
God was glorified by Pharaoh.  
Everyone got to see what a wonderful rescuer God is  
because he saved them from Pharaoh's grasp with powerful miracles.  
Everyone was talking about it.  
They still make movies about it.  
Was God fair on Pharaoh?  
Yes he was.  
Exodus says both things.  
God hardened Pharaoh's heart  
and Pharaoh hardened his own heart.  
Pharaoh hardened his own heart so God was fair.  
And that was not pretty for Pharaoh or the nation of Egypt.  
But God hardened Pharaoh's heart  
and that broadcast God's glory among the nations  
as they saw and were left in fear of his great power.  
Is God allowed to use Pharaoh to make his glory known?  
Of course he is.  
God made Pharaoh.  
This is not a conversation between equals.  
This is creator and creature.

And God can demonstrate his glory any way he chooses to.

How does God choose to make known his glory?

9:22-23 "What if God, although 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 his glory - even us,

whom he called not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?"

Paul's not here talking about Pharaoh.

He's talking about the world as it is now.

This is his conclusion,

though he fleshes it out with some quotes from the OT that we won't go through because I've run out of time.

There are currently in the world

people whose hearts are hard towards God.

Just like Pharaoh, they have hardened their own hearts and God has hardened their hearts.

But unlike Pharaoh,

they are not facing miraculous judgements like the plagues of Egypt.

It can seem like they are getting away with their hard hearts.

But actually, it's God being patient.

He has chosen to show mercy on many people.

Not all of them have yet experienced his mercy.

There are still people responding to the gospel.

But Judgement Day will come.

And when it does,

then we will realise fully how great our salvation is.

The purpose of God's judgement  
is so that we, the people he's had mercy on,  
can know how great his mercy is,  
how great his power is to defeat sin and evil,  
and so to know how glorious and worthy of praise he is for all eternity.

What the point of us thinking about God's election of us his people?  
I think it's so that we would better understand his mercy.

We didn't earn it.

We didn't deserve it.

How did we not end up like Ishmael, Esau or Pharaoh?

Only because of God's kindness to us.

We were chosen not because of anything about us,  
and because of that we rejoice in God's mercy.

And when we see his judgement,

we rejoice that in his glorious power he has defeated all evil  
and brought his children to his everlasting kingdom.