

Romans 9, Pt. 1

The ninth chapter of Romans has become a battleground. It is one of those passages of Scripture where people of different theological perspectives come to lob grenades at one another. I don't believe that it has to be. To be clear, I have a position in the debate - I will say more about that in a moment - but I think that this passage has much to say to all of us if we approach it carefully and with much prayer. In order to begin our study of this chapter, I would like to make **two kinds of prefatory remarks**.

1. **We should *not* come to the Bible to find our own thoughts and feelings.** If our primary questions in coming to the text are things like, "What do I think about this subject?" and "How does this passage make me feel?" then we are sure to miss much of what the Lord has for us. Instead, we should come to the Bible asking, "What does God want me to think? What does God want me to feel? What does God want me to do?" We are striving to hear God's voice. To approach the Bible this way does not mean that we become arrogant, in some wild attempt to deify our own opinion. We are all finite. We all struggle with sin. We all miss things and struggle to believe things. Instead, we must come to the Bible as pilgrims. Psalm 84:5 - "Blessed is the man whose strength is in You, whose heart is set on pilgrimage." But here's the thing to remember about pilgrims: they have not arrived, they know that they are missing things, but nonetheless they also know that there is a place to which they are going. There is a destination which is outside of them and independent of them. There is Truth-with-a-capital-T in God's Word.
2. **I come to Romans 9 happily confessing myself to be a Calvinist Christian.** What that means can be put very briefly. God is mighty, powerful, sovereign, and wise. He chose to create a beautiful world with human beings as his image-bearers. In his wisdom, he gave to humanity freedom and responsibility, and I mean a real, substantial freedom and responsibility. Knowing that human beings would misuse this freedom

and fall into sin, God chose in eternity past to save a great number of people out of fallen humanity. This choice was not general but particular. This choice was not based on foreseen characteristics or even foreseen faith. It is a choice rooted in mercy to the undeserving (and we are all undeserving). In due course, Jesus came and died upon the cross. There is a sense in which this death is for all people and, indeed, for all of creation. The blood of Jesus buys the blessings of a sunny day or a bountiful harvest for sinful people. Yet the death of Christ is particularly effective for all those who believe upon him, who are after all the very ones whom God has chosen in eternity. I believe that you and I fight against God's Spirit, but that in the end God's grace will overcome. I believe that God's love is stronger than human categories like race, language, socioeconomic status, and past history. If God is the sovereign savior, then none of those barriers which exist in our communities make any difference to his saving power. I believe that God uses us to preach the gospel, so that people will respond to the gospel. I believe that he is the one who gives people new hearts so that they will believe.

I believe these things because that is what I see in the Bible. I believe that these ideas were present in Paul's mind as he wrote the ninth chapter of Romans. But I also believe that **Paul did not write this chapter in order to teach us about Reformed theology.** There is a different primary purpose. This is why Romans 9 does not need to be a battleground. There is actually much here that Christians of many traditions could agree upon, if we would just be willing to set down the grenades. So what is Paul's primary purpose here? It is consistent with what he has been teaching throughout the letter. It is also consistent with the words of Jesus as recorded in John 3. I believe that the primary purpose of Romans 9 is to say exactly what Jesus said when he spoke to Nicodemus - **"You must be born again."**

I will wait until next week to make the bulk of my argument. Today I primarily want to do two things. First, we need to be reminded how this chapter fits with the overall flow of Romans. Second, we need to note the primary problem that prompts Paul to write what he does is the problem of Jewish unbelief.

The structure of Romans. Romans is the good news of God's righteousness. God will vindicate his righteousness through both judgment and mercy. The

way of judgment is developed in 1:18-3:20. God will judge us on the basis of our works. The Jewish people will be judged by their failure to live up to the standards of the Mosaic legislation. The Gentiles will be judged on the basis of conscience and what has been called natural law. The judgment of non-Jewish people is not based on what they did not know but upon what they have actually done. Everyone has sufficient light to see that they stand under the judgment of God - "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God" (3:10-11). But with chapter three, there is a decisive turn: "But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (3:21). Christ has died as an atoning sacrifice. **Justification** - right standing - with God comes through faith in Christ, the very same kind of faith which was exhibited in the life of Abraham and all the faithful throughout history.

In Romans 5:1-8:17, Paul discusses the doctrine of **sanctification**, the kind of righteousness which is worked into God's people and out through God's people into the world. We have peace with God. We have union with Christ. We are freed from slavery to sin. We are indwelt by and led by the Holy Spirit. In the remainder of chapter eight, Paul points us to **the glorious future** that awaits us. Creation will be liberated. We will receive full adoption and redemption. Nothing can separate us from God's good purposes for us.

Along the way, Paul has written much about the law, and I think he traffics in rather subtle distinctions. On the one hand there is the law as it was objectively given by God. On the other hand, there is the law as it was subjectively experienced by those who do not have the faith of Abraham. For those without faith, the law is a repressive reality that is neglected, abused, and manipulated. And this is not just a problem for Jewish people. Remember that all others have conscience and natural law. Without faith, we all play what I would call "**law games.**" We try to barter. We focus on external things. We act as if one good deed can atone for other bad deeds. We judge others. We play comparison games. And all along, the sin inside of us grabs ahold of the law to incite us to sin ("Whatever you do, don't press the shiny red button..."). But Paul says that we can be set free from this poor experience of the law through Jesus: "So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God" (7:4). **When we are united to Jesus in faith,**

we no longer need to play games with God's moral instruction. We can love God's law because God has given us a new heart.

Be they Jew or Gentile, for those who have been regenerated - born again - the gospel is **the power of God for salvation** (1:16). There is forgiveness for what we have done wrong and help to live differently in the future. God's love lives inside of us, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

The problem of Jewish unbelief. And this takes us right to the edge of chapter nine, and presents us with a significant problem. If God's love cannot fail, if God's purposes for creation and for his people cannot be defeated, then what are we supposed to make of the lingering problem of Jewish unbelief? There are members of God's chosen people who do not believe in Jesus. They have refused the message of the gospel. So it sure seems like something has separated God's people from God's love. For Paul, this state of affairs is personally heartbreaking: "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 people, those of my own race" (9:2-3). The Jewish people had received adoption as God's special people, the glory cloud, the covenants, the law, the temple, the prophetic promises. They are the people of Abraham and the ancestors of Jesus. God had given them all of these good things and more. All these things which Paul lists were part of God's good objective blessings to his people Israel. And yet they do not believe in Jesus.

I will leave things on a cliffhanger this week. It is enough to note that Paul needs to remind us of some things which he has been striving to teach since the first words of chapter one. The conclusion next week will show us the need to be born again, to be regenerate, to be faithful to God from the heart.

Before we conclude, I think it is proper to note that there are **situations that we know of that break our hearts as well.** There are people that we love that persist in unbelief. We have heroes that let us down, and their fall is traumatic to us. And we wonder (even if we never say it out loud) - "How could this happen? Has God failed in his faithfulness?" It hurts. I can't resolve those feelings with one sermon. All I can do is note that Paul felt it, too. He knew what it was like to feel that kind of anguish. But even more we should remember the words of Jesus as he looked out over Jerusalem: "'O Jerusalem,

Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37). Brothers and sisters - there is a sweet fellowship with Jesus even in our sorrows.