

# GOD’S SOVEREIGN CHOICE AND MERCY

Romans 9:1-29

Key Verse: 9:16

**“It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.”**

In most of Paul’s epistles, we find the pattern of doctrinal teaching followed by practical application. However, Romans is different. In between the doctrinal and application sections, Paul spends three chapters, 9-11, explaining how we should understand Israel’s unbelief in God’s salvation history. Some scholars consider this like a postscript or a parenthetical section.<sup>1</sup> Others consider it the climax of Romans.<sup>2</sup> It seems best to regard it as integral to the whole letter. It is widely recognized as an explanation of the relationship of Jews and Gentiles--particularly the unique position of the Jews in God’s purpose.<sup>3</sup> The word **“God”** appears 31 times, while **“Christ”** appears just six times. The emphasis is on God in his sovereign choice, rather than Christ in his saving work. Paul gives a bigger picture of God’s work, focusing on his dealing with the nation Israel, rather than on individuals. Historically, though Israel was God’s chosen nation, she rejected the Messiah and invited God’s judgment. This made people wonder, “Did God fail?” “Did God forever reject his people?” “Is the gospel incapable of saving the Jews?” Paul agonized over these questions. While doing so, he discovered God’s mysterious plan to save his people Israel. He ends this section with praise to God. Romans 9-11 is relevant to us because it teaches God’s unfailing love, which assures us of our salvation.

Chapter 9 deals with the issue of God’s sovereign choice, how he works, and his character as he carries out his salvation work. A key word is **“mercy,”** which is repeated six times. Why is it important to acknowledge God’s sovereignty in his salvation work? How is God’s sovereignty relevant in our personal lives? Why is God’s mercy significant as he exercises his sovereign choice? With these questions in mind, let’s listen to God’s word.

**First, Paul’s anguish over Israel (1-5).** At the end of chapter 8, Paul sang a song of victory because of God’s great love. Then, immediately, he expresses his inner anguish. His heart was broken, not over a personal problem, but because of his own people’s unbelief. Though Paul had been a Jewish Pharisee, God called him as

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<sup>1</sup> Stott, John R. W., *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), p.261. Lloyd-Jones, D.M., *Romans vol. 8* (Banner of Truth, 1975), pp.367f.

<sup>2</sup> Stendahl, Krister, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Fortress, 1976; SCM, 1977), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> John Stott *Ibid.*, 261.

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an apostle for the Gentiles. He worked hard to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. As we see in Acts, when Paul preached the gospel, most of the Jews rejected it while many Gentiles were delighted to believe. Jews who did not believe became jealous, hardened their hearts, and persecuted Paul - and even tried to kill him. They regarded him as a traitor. So it is easy to assume that Paul loved the Gentiles but not his own people. This was not true. Paul spoke the truth about himself in Christ. This truth was testified to by his conscience and confirmed by the Holy Spirit (1). He had great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart (2). He had such great pain that he could wish that he himself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his own people (3). He seems to be too extreme. Salvation is the most precious treasure that we cannot exchange for anything. Jesus said, **“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet forfeit their soul?”** (Mk 8:36). Yet Paul loved his own people so much that he was willing to exchange his soul for their salvation. How could he have such love? It was because he had the heart of God. He knew God's love for his own people Israel.

Out of his great love, God bestowed many special blessings on Israel. In verses 4-5 Paul listed them. The first blessing is adoption to sonship (Ex 4:22). Recently Meghan Markle married Prince Harry and became a princess. She seemed to be the envy of all the girls in the world. To become a member of the royal family is indeed wonderful. How much more wonderful to be adopted into God's family. Another blessing is the divine glory. God dwelt among them and revealed himself in a special way, uniquely among the nations (Ex 40:34). To see the glory of God in this troubled world is indeed a great blessing. This enables us to live a glorious life. God also had a special relationship with them through covenants (Gen 17:1-8; Ex 24:1-4; 2Sa 7:5-16,28). God loved them, delivered them, protected them, and provided for them based on these covenants. Furthermore, God gave them the law which revealed his righteous character. They could recognize sin as sin and be trained as his holy people through the law. Temple worship was another blessing from God. They could know and worship the one true God, while other nations worshiped lifeless idols. They could receive forgiveness of sins, listen to God's word and have fellowship with God so that their souls could be refreshed. God gave them countless promises. As they held onto these promises, they could lead fruitful and victorious lives.

Theirs are the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and more. To have even one patriarch is a great blessing for a nation--we have Abraham Lincoln. But the people of Israel had numerous patriarchs who were examples of faith. Finally, from the Israelites is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen. When

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we see all these privileges, God's special love for Israel is undeniable. As we know, privilege is accompanied by responsibility. God blessed them, not just for their enjoyment, but to make them a blessing to the nations of the world. To be a blessing is not easy; it requires self-denial and sacrifice. Generally, the people of Israel enjoyed God's blessings, but abandoned God's purpose and even God himself. What about us? God has blessed America with freedom to worship, freedom of speech, economic opportunity, and more. We can travel the world with relative ease and communicate with just about anyone, anywhere. What are we doing with our God-given privileges? When the Messiah came, Israel rejected him because he was not what they expected. They expected a powerful and glorious ruler. But Jesus looked poor and weak. His disciples were uneducated, working class country people. He spent his time caring for the sick and wayward. Jewish leaders criticized him as **"a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners"** (Mt 11:19). They despised him, condemned him and crucified him. They threw him away like a rejected stone (1Pe 2:4). Because of their rejection, it seemed that God's plan had failed. Did God really fail? Paul answers in verses 6-13.

**Second, God's sovereign choice (6-13).** To testify that God had not failed, Paul explained how God works through his sovereign choice. First of all, God works through his promise (6-9). To support this, Paul clarifies who is the true Israel. Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel (6). For example, Abraham's descendants are as numerous as the sand on the seashore. Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn son through Hagar. Later, Isaac was born through Sarah. After that, through Keturah, Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah were born (Gen 25:1-2). Among these eight sons, only Isaac was chosen to bear God's covenant promise. God said, **"It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned"** (7; Gen 21:12). **In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring** (8). Even though Ishmael was firstborn, he was not born according to God's promise. Rather, he was the fruit of Abraham's own plan and effort. So, he could not bear God's covenant promises. On the other hand, Isaac was born according to a God's promise. God said, **"At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son"** (9). And it happened. God works through his promise.

In Galatians, Paul deals with the same issue. He explains that those who believe in Jesus are children of Abraham, in contrast to those who rely on their own effort in keeping the law (3:7; 4:28). Paul says, **"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise"** (3:29). John

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1:12-13 say, “Yet to all who did receive him (that is, Jesus), to those who **believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.**” No one can make a child of God, except God. God makes anyone who believes in Jesus a child of God, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, social status, or education level (Gal 3:28). Here we learn how important it is to believe God's promise of salvation. Sadly, there have been tragic scandals in a nearby megachurch and in the Catholic church. This grieves us deeply. No matter what happens to these church organizations, we can be sure that God's word never fails. Everyone who believes God's promise is a child of God and will be saved. What is done by merely human effort, relying on human wisdom and means, will not last.

**Secondly, God chooses whom he wants, regardless of human desire and effort (10-13).** To illustrate this, Paul gives an example through Isaac and Rebekah (10). Although they established a beautiful family, Rebekah was barren for a long time - not 5 or 6 years, but 20 years. Yet they did not lose hope. With faith, Isaac prayed for his wife. With faith, Rebekah waited on God without making her own plan, like Sarah did. Finally, God blessed their faith and twin sons were conceived, Esau and Jacob. These boys wrestled with each other even in the womb. It was a painful pregnancy and Rebekah prayed to God. God revealed his plan to her, saying, “**The older will serve the younger**” (12). Before the twins were born, or had done anything good or bad, God had already chosen Jacob (11). To further support his point, Paul quoted from Malachi 1:2-3, where God says, “**Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated**” (13). Here we should understand that God's sovereign choice is not an arbitrary granting of salvation, but it regards whom God uses to carry out his salvation plan. The point is that God's will is not determined by man's deeds, but by God himself. God's purpose alone stands. Otherwise, the success of God's salvation work could not be certain. It is because human beings are fundamentally weak. But God is faithful. God never fails. Carrying out his salvation work by his sovereign choice is God's wisdom and great grace. God's sovereign choice faithfully expresses his unfailing love. Thank God!

God's sovereign choice also affects each person. Some people wonder why they were born in a poor family and in a poor country. Others wonder why they or their children have physical handicaps. Still others wonder why they were born in a Christian family. But none of us had a choice about where or when we were born, or into what kind of family or country. In some sense we were thrown into the world with all our extenuating circumstances. God's sovereign guidance extends throughout our lives. Regarding marriage, Jesus said, “**What God has joined**

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together, let no one separate” (Mt 19:6). Yet some question their marriage. They think that if they married another person, their lives would be so much better. Regardless of our specific issues, we all must make a choice: to acknowledge God's sovereignty or not. If we do not, what happens? We can easily develop a victim's mentality. Then we blame our parents or other people, country or circumstances. We become unthankful and fall into fatalism. We can regret that we married and resent our spouse. Bitterness takes root in our hearts and grows. Eventually, we are consumed with doubt about God's love and stand against him. However, if we acknowledge God's sovereignty in our lives, our perspective totally changes. We begin to see everything from God's point of view. We can find the meaning of our lives and God's purpose in all that happens. We can be thankful and joyful, embracing life as it comes. With faith in God, we can challenge obstacles and bear good fruit. As a girl, Amy Carmichael was unhappy with her brown eyes. She wanted blue eyes, thinking it would make her popular. Later, she went to India as a missionary and served exploited girls. To live among them, she covered her fair skin with coffee dye and put on Indian clothes. One day she realized that all the Indian girls had brown eyes. If she had blue eyes, she would not be able to look Indian. She found the meaning of her brown eyes and thanked God. It is so important to acknowledge God's sovereignty in our lives!

**Third, God works by his mercy (14-29).** Though God's sovereign choice comes from his deep wisdom and love, it is not easy for us to understand. We easily think that in choosing Isaac over Ishmael, and Jacob over Esau, God is unjust. Paul's answer is, “**Not at all!**” (14). He explained why in verses 15-18. He began by quoting Exodus 33:19. God said, “**I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.**” God's sovereign choice is not a matter of justice, but of mercy. If God dealt with sinners according to his justice, everyone would perish. But God had mercy on sinners. Because of his mercy, we can be saved. God extends his mercy according to his sovereign choice. It is not something we can earn or deserve. Let's read verse 16 says. “**It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.**” God's heart is a heart of mercy and compassion. Although he is the Almighty God, he understands our weakness and reaches down to help us. We see this mercy most clearly through Jesus. In his great mercy, Jesus never breaks a bruised reed or snuffs out a smoldering wick. In him all nations find hope (Mt 12:20-21). Since mercy motivates God's sovereign acts, we can be sure they are good.

Now let's consider a Biblical example of responding to God's sovereign choice and mercy. In the time of Judges, everyone did as they saw fit and Israel had become lawless and immoral (Jdg 21:25). Polygamy was common. A man

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named Elkanah had two wives: Hannah and Peninnah. Hannah was barren, while Peninnah had many children (1Sa 1:2). This caused a lot of trouble in their family. The Bible says about Hannah, **“The LORD had closed her womb”** (1Sa 1:5-6). This means that her barrenness was not a biological matter, but precisely God's will for her. We can find three responses to this sovereign act of God. Elkanah thought that since the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, there was no hope to have a baby. He passively accepted God's sovereign act and tried to comfort her with human love. This could not assuage Hannah's anguish. Another response was that of Peninnah. Peninnah thought that the LORD had cursed Hannah - the traditional interpretation of barrenness. So, she took advantage of this situation. She kept provoking Hannah to irritate her, hoping to get rid of her rival.

Hannah's response was different. She did not fight with Peninnah by leveraging her husband's love. She did not fall into fatalism, blaming her husband or the situation. She did not torture herself with condemnation. Rather, in that desperate situation, she came to the LORD in prayer. How could she do this? She believed that though the LORD had closed her womb, he could also open her womb. She believed the LORD was merciful, wise and compassionate and that he wanted to have a relationship with her. With this faith, Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly and made a vow (1Sa 1:9-11). She was sure that God heard her. Her face was no longer downcast (1Sa 1:18-20). God gave her baby Samuel and began a work of spiritual revival in Israel. We can learn from her to trust God even when his sovereign acts bring pain, and to come to him for grace and mercy in our time of need.

There is another aspect to God's sovereign choice. Paul reveals this through God's words 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”** (17). Pharaoh tried to oppose God's deliverance of Israel due to his pride. Though he saw many miracles, he hardened his heart and never repented. He thought his rebellion would thwart God's plan. But in fact, it was God who hardened Pharaoh and used him to display his glory. Paul concluded, **“Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden”** (18). Here we learn that God's sovereignty is also exercised through judgment.

Paul anticipated another instinctive response from sinful man: **“Why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?”** (19) Paul reminds us that God is the Creator and we are his creatures. We have no right to talk back to God, saying, **“Why did you make me like this?”** (20) Paul asked, **“Does not the**

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**potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?"** (21) The potter has the right to make fine china or a toilet seat according to his plan. He also has the right to discard them if they become useless. God, however, never uses his authority randomly. He always displays his power, patience, mercy and glory (22-23). God could immediately destroy the objects of his wrath. Instead, he bore them with great patience. He did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory. He called from among both Jews and Gentiles his people whom he loved. They are the children of the living God (24-26). Even from among Israel, God chose a remnant to be saved (27-29). God always works through the remnant chosen by his grace.

God carries out his salvation work according to his sovereign choice and with divine mercy. We can be sure that God's sovereign choice is good and that he always works for the good. Let's acknowledge God's sovereignty and follow his guidance.