

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN WORLD MISSION

Romans 9:1-33
Key Verse 9:33

Lesson 9

"As it is written: 'See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'"

Paul was missionary. His mission field was the Gentile world. He was a Jew, a Pharisee, and he loved his people, the chosen people of God. He loved God. His heart was in anguish because God's heart was broken. His sorrow at Israel's failure reflected the sorrow of God. God had poured out great blessings on Israel, but Israel had rejected the greatest blessing--the Christ. Israel rejected God's love. But Israel's failure did not mean that God had failed. God had chosen Israel to be his own people, a holy nation, a nation of priests. Israel rejected the messiah and rejected her missionary responsibility to bring the world to obedience to God. But God is not defeated by man's failure. He continues to use his sovereign power to accomplish his redemptive purpose in the world.

In chapter 8, Paul describes the great privileges that our loving God has provided for his children--for those who are justified by faith in Christ. In Chapter 9, Paul weeps because his own people Israel--who are God's own people--have rejected this greatest gift of God's love.

1. Israel's privileges

The privileges which God gave Israel were very great. They had been given (i) adoption as sons--Ex 4:22; (ii) divine glory--God's own glorious Presence dwelling in the midst of his people (Ex 40:34); (iii) the covenants--binding the people to God and making them his own (Ge 17:7-10; Ex 24:7-8; 19:4-6); (iv) the receiving of the law--the Bible (Ex 20-40); (v) the temple worship--the whole sacrificial system which opened the way for sinners to draw near a holy God for forgiveness and blessing; (vi) the promises--God's promise to Abraham in Ge 12:2,3 and his promise to David in 2 Sa 7:14. These are promises of the Messiah; (vii) the patriarchs--great men of faith who set the direction of the history of the nation. The greatest privilege of all was the one toward which all the others pointed: God sent his Son, the Christ, to be born a Jew. God sent his only Son into the world through the people of Israel. Wherever Paul speaks of God's dealings with people he says, "to the Jew first, then to the Gentile." Israel rejoiced in her special privileges. She was proud of them, although she had no reason to be proud, because the privileges were given by the sovereign grace of God--not because Israel deserved them.

2. Israel's failure

The great tragedy of Israel was that she rejected the Christ-and she rejected God's missionary purpose. She missed the whole point of the privileges that God had given her. The privileges made her proud. She accepted and rejoiced in the fact that God had elected her to be his chosen people. She accepted God's ways of working and his sovereignty--until he worked in ways that she didn't like. Israel rejoiced in the fact that God chose Isaac instead of Ishmael; and she was glad that he chose Jacob, not Esau. She praised God for showing power and proclaiming the greatness of his name in all the earth through his hand of judgment on Pharaoh. But there were two things that God did that she could not accept. First, when God sent his promised Messiah to die on a Roman cross, she stumbled over the stumbling block of the cross. She did not accept him. Second, when God in his sovereign mercy and power chose to call Gentiles to be his people, she refused to accept them. She rejected her Messiah and she rejected her mission. Israel forgot that God had called her to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests for the world (Ex 19:4-6). She rejected God's world mission purpose for her own life and became content to sit back and enjoy the blessings God had given her. But God's redemptive purposes for his world, and his sovereign will cannot be blocked. God actually used the rejection of Israel to bring the Gentiles into his Church.

If we who are God's new Israel, the Christian Church, do not accept God's blessings with a great sense of responsibility, we also will fail--and God will by-pass us and find another way to accomplish his world mission. We must learn to accept and rejoice in the sovereign ways of God who works in and among us. If we continue in our own stubborn ways and insist on our own righteousness, we cannot receive the blessings God wants to give us as his children. We must not become proud because of our privileges--we must walk humbly before God to seek and to obey his will.

3. God's sovereign ways

God's ways are not our ways. He does things that we cannot understand. But he is sovereign. He is our Creator. We are his creatures. He is the potter; we are clay. He has the right to make any kind of vessel he chooses. He is the Lord of history. He elects the people whom he desires to use in his redemptive history.

But God is not arbitrary in his ways of working. He has a purpose in history. God's purpose is redemptive. He wants his power known and his mighty name proclaimed to all the people of the world, so that all people might fear and worship him. When all creation acknowledges him as God and bows before him in praise and gratitude and obedience, then the broken order of creation is restored. God is glorified and the purpose of creation is filled.

God's method of working in history is by election. God works through people--through individuals. He chose one man, Abraham, and called him. Abraham obeyed

God's call and God made a covenant with him and his descendants. God chose Isaac, not Ishmael to be the covenant son; he chose Jacob, not Esau. He promised Abraham that through his descendants the world would be blessed. He was not reneging on his promise because he did not chose Esau, but only chose Isaac and Jacob. Rather, he worked through Isaac and Jacob to carry out and fulfill his promise. God was glorified when Pharaoh, the oppressor of his people was crushed and Moses led God's people out of Egypt. God showed all the nations of the world that he is sovereign Lord of all the earth--even Lord of Pharaoh. He is sovereign Lord of all men and nations. He is the Lord of history.

God called the Gentiles. Paul gets to the point of why he has been talking about the sovereign purposes and work of God. God, in his own sovereign will and wisdom, elected to call people from among the Gentiles to be his people. This was not a sudden or hasty decision He spoke about his plans for the Gentile world through the prophets. How great is his mercy and patience. If he waits patiently, withholding his wrath from the Gentiles until finally he calls his own people from among these objects of his wrath, originally intended for destruction, how great is his mercy! How amazing it is that he could call Gentiles to become a part of his people, and include them with the objects of his mercy, prepared for glory--the Jews. His wisdom and power and mercy are beyond our understanding. Furthermore, Hosea, the prophet, predicted that God would do this very thing. When Hosea said, 'I will call them my people who are not my people', he was speaking of the Gentiles who would be called to become God's people.

And what about Israel? God, in his mercy and love, chose to spare a remnant of Israel. Because of her unfaithfulness, Israel deserved God's wrath and judgment--but God elected to spare a remnant. Isaiah especially prophesies about this.

What can we learn here about God and his requirements for us? God, now, as in the past justifies all men on the basis of their faith. The Jews tried to establish a righteousness of their own. In doing this, they rejected the righteousness given by God. Our righteousness is nothing but filthy rags. We are sinners before God. Only he can make us righteous. He has chosen, in his own sovereign wisdom and love to cleanse us from sin and make us righteous by the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross for our sins. The word of the cross is a stumbling block for all who, in pride, refuse to repent. The Jews stumbled over the stumbling block. But all who believe in Jesus may obtain the righteousness that is through faith.

Now, as in the past, God longs for the redemption of all nations and peoples. The task of proclaiming the gospel to the world has been given to us--to those who have been saved by his grace through faith in Jesus. We who have received his Messiah have also been given his mission. We must not let the witness of God's love and mercy become a stumbling stone for us. If we do not repent and come to Jesus in faith we will stumble over the stumbling stone; if we reject or neglect God's mission for us because of our narrow and selfish hearts, we will stumble over the stumbling stone.

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them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”(33)