

ROMANS SERIES #27

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 28, 1996, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 9:19-33

LET GOD BE GOD! (ii)

Let me begin today by giving you an overview of Romans 9, 10 and 11. In these three chapters we have a kind of parenthesis in Romans. There is a large doctrinal section of Romans (chapters 1-8) which we have just studied in some detail, and in which Paul deals with the basic subjects of sin, salvation and sanctification. Then there is this three-chapter parenthesis (chapters 9-11) which is all about Israel — what is the place of the Jewish people in world history and in God's sovereign plan of redemption? Then from chapter 12 to the end of the letter we have the practical section in which Paul gives us a lot of guidance in Christian morality, and how to put into practice all the sound doctrine we have assimilated in the preceding chapters. Chapters 12-16 tell us how to “walk the walk.”

Now in regard to this middle section of Romans, chapters 9-11, you will notice that I have placed on your outline an overview. Romans 9 is about Israel's PAST. Romans 10 is about Israel's PRESENT. And Romans 11 is about Israel's FUTURE.

We are now studying Romans 9 which talks about God's sovereign selection of Israel as His “chosen” people. God, as we discovered, selected them for a special reason, and that reason was not simply that they could be blessed; but God chose them to be a blessing to the rest of the world. But Israel did not grasp their opportunity; they did not spread the message; they hoarded it and said, “We've got it and you don't.” And then when God sent the Messiah as a member of their own race, they rejected Him. But God's selection of Israel in the past was an act of His sovereign will.

In chapter 10 we're going to see what the Jewish situation is in the PRESENT. And the Bible says that God has temporarily set the Jewish nation aside. Up until now they are the main story in the Bible, but now the Christian Church becomes the main story, and you hear about the Church all through the New Testament. Chapter 10 deals with the fairness of God in offering salvation to all people, and that's what we'll look at in the next sermon. This chapter also happens to be one of the greatest missionary passages in the Bible.

And then there is chapter 11 which deals with Israel's FUTURE — because God isn't through with Israel, and there will be a restoration, and we're going to see that God is faithful to His promise. There are a great number of promises in Scripture which God has said He will fulfil relating to the nation of Israel, promises which as yet have not been fulfilled. But they will be fulfilled at the proper time, as we see God's faithfulness demonstrated to Israel.

And now, back to chapter 9. In verses 1-18 which we studied in the previous sermon, we

saw Paul asking and answering two vital questions:

(1) Has God's promise failed? At first sight it would seem that His promise to Israel had failed, for He had promised to bless them. But they had *forfeited* His blessing through unbelief. Israel's failure was their own fault, however; it was not due to the failure of God's Word which had been addressed to them. Verse 6 says, "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." That is to say, there have always been *two* Israels — those physically descended from Jacob (Israel) on the one hand, and Jacob's spiritual descendants on the other — and God's promise was addressed to the latter, who had received the promise through faith. Paul had already made this distinction earlier in chapter 2:28ff, between those who were Jews outwardly, whose circumcision was in the body, and those who were Jews inwardly, who had received a circumcision of the heart by the Spirit. So, God had not failed in His promise.

(2) Is God unjust? (Verses 14-18) To choose some for salvation and pass by others looks like a breach of elementary justice. Is it? Paul says "No." In the early chapters of Romans he had pointed out that all human beings are sinful and therefore guilty in God's sight, so that nobody *deserves* to be saved. The wonder is *not* that some are saved and others are not; the wonder is that *anybody* is saved at all, for we deserve nothing at God's hand but judgment. I said last week that if we received what we deserve (which is judgment), or if we receive what we do not deserve (which is mercy), in neither case is God unjust. If therefore anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit belongs to God. And this is the paradox and the mystery which lies enshrined in the biblical doctrine of predestination and election!

And this brings us to the passage we will study today, Romans 9:19-33, in which Paul continues by asking a third question:

(3) Why does God still blame us? (Verse 19) You see, when we understand that salvation is based on God's mercy, not our merit, and that God is not unjust in saving some people and in passing over others, the normal reaction to this is for people to say, "Well, if everything depends on God's sovereignty, what happens to my responsibility? How can I be held accountable if God pulls all the strings? How indeed can God blame me for anything if He is in complete control of my destiny? Is this *fair* of God? Paul anticipates that question.

Look what he says, beginning with verse 19 — "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists His will?'" That is to say, "If God has everything planned ahead of time, am I not just a pawn?" Look how Paul answers this — "But who are you, oh man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to Him Who formed it, 'Why did You make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?"

You see, a potter has the right to shape a lump of clay any way he wants to. And God, as our Creator, has a right to shape our lives, and He also has a right to shape history. Now we should understand that Paul is not censuring people who ask sincere questions about heart-wrenching situations. Rather he is condemning those who quarrel with God, who talk back to Him, because such people demonstrate a reprehensible spirit of rebellion against God, a refusal to let God be God, and they refuse to acknowledge themselves as hell-deserving sinners. Their

attitude is the exact opposite of our Lord, because they say, “Not Your will, but mine be done, O God.”

But I see also a message of hope in Paul’s illustration of the potter and the clay: It is the same hope that Jeremiah cherished in our Old Testament lesson this morning (Jeremiah 18:1-6). It really means that if we mess up our lives the Master Potter can still take that marred vessel and re-shape it. He can bring good out of evil.

In verses 22 and 23 (Living Bible) Paul gets into some real speculation. He says, “Does not God have a perfect right to show His fury and power against those who are fit only for destruction, those He has been patient with for all this time? And He has a right to take others such as ourselves who have been made to receive the riches of His glory, whether we are Jews or Gentiles, and to be kind to us so that everyone can see how very great His glory is.” What is Paul saying here? He’s basically saying, “Doesn’t God have the right to be God?” Everything we have and are comes from Him and belongs to Him.

But some people take this passage and say, “Well, there is really no freedom; therefore, God planned for certain people to be criminals. They have no choice. Their sin is inevitable.” The problem with that is that it makes God the Author of all sin, and then you can blame God, and say, “The reason I killed my mother-in-law was that God made me this way.” But James 1:13 says, “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone.” God is not the author of evil.

This is undoubtedly a difficult passage, but we can surely summarize what Paul is saying in this chapter in one simple sentence: “Let God be God!” He has a right to do whatever He wants to do. He is not on trial. After all, if God were small enough for me to figure out everything about Him, He wouldn’t be big enough to solve my problems.

Look at Isaiah 55:8-9 which is a good commentary on Romans 9: “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.’” There are some things we’re just not going to know about the plan of God until we get to heaven! And sometimes we spend far too much time trying to unscrew the inscrutable! God is infinite in knowledge, power and love. We don’t see the total picture, but He does. I cannot understand how God is ultimately sovereign, and yet I have a responsibility to obey Him because He is going to hold me accountable. But the Bible clearly teaches both. He knew we would be saved even before we were born, but I *do* have a *choice*, and I will be held accountable for what I do with Jesus.

In verses 25-29 Paul quotes two Old Testament prophets, Hosea and Isaiah. In verses 25 and 26 he points out that Hosea predicted that God would reach out and save many Gentiles besides the Jews. He says, “I will call them ‘My people’ who are not My people. . . It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’” Hosea predicted, you see, that God and His salvation was for everybody, not just for Israel.

And Isaiah then predicted that even though Israel as a nation would reject Christ, there would still be a small group, a remnant of true Jewish believers, who would accept the Messiah. Look at verse 27: “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, ‘Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.’”

So, both Hosea and Isaiah assure us that in God’s new society, the Church, there will be both Jews and Gentiles as joint heirs with Christ. As Hosea prophesied, multitudes of Gentiles, formerly disenfranchised, have now been welcomed as the people of God. As Isaiah prophesied, however, the Jewish membership within the Christian Church would only be a remnant of the nation, so small in fact as to constitute *not* the inclusion of Israel, but its exclusion, not its acceptance but its rejection, as Paul states in chapter 11:15. Jesus Himself had foretold this situation when He said in Matthew 8:11: “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the Kingdom [that is, the Jews] will be thrown outside...” Matthew says that the Gentiles will come from the east and the west, but Luke, in recording these words of our Lord, has Him say that they “will come from east and west and north and south...” (Luke 13:29) From every nation on earth the Gentiles will flock into the Kingdom as a result of the worldwide missionary enterprise of the Church. And this brings us to Paul’s fourth and final question in verses 30-33.

(4) What then shall we say in conclusion? Paul says, “What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith (they didn’t work for it); but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not obtained it. Why not? Because they pursued it *not* by faith, but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the ‘stumbling stone.’ As it is written, ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’” What is Paul saying? He’s saying, “The Jews were zealous to be right with God, but they were doing it in the wrong way; they were trying to earn their way to heaven by their good works. But the *Gentiles*, who weren’t even looking for God, when they heard the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ, were the ones who were brought into salvation through faith in the Savior’s atoning sacrifice on the Cross.”

Who is the “stumbling stone”? It is our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says, “Some people are going to stumble over Jesus Christ, while other people are going to stand on Him Who is the Solid Rock of their salvation. You remember how our Lord said in Mark 12:10 referring to Himself — “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.” And Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:11 has the same thought in mind when he says, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

So, everybody has to decide how to relate to this Rock which God has laid down — the “Rock of Ages,” Christ Jesus our Lord. There are only two possibilities. One is to put our trust in Him *alone* for our eternal salvation, to take Him as the Foundation and then build the superstructure of our lives upon Him. The other possibility is to bark our shins against Him, and so stumble and fall over the precipice!

I love the closing words of this chapter: “And the one who trusts in Him {Christ} will never be put to shame.” When we sin, we are put to shame, aren’t we? And it’s a devastating

experience. But to live in the center of God's will, as you "trust and obey," is to guarantee that you can walk through life with your head held high — a sinner saved by grace, "a burning stick snatched from the fire" (Zechariah 3:2).

Let me say this in conclusion. Paul, who understood the doctrine of election and predestination and believed it wholeheartedly, nevertheless had anguish in his heart concerning his unsaved fellow Jews and was prepared to go to hell if that would lead to their salvation. So, the doctrine of predestination should never diminish our concern for our unbelieving and unsaved friends. Paul says in effect: "Just because I've got a ticket of admission to heaven doesn't mean I can say, 'Hey, who cares about everybody else?' Just because God has saved me, I ought to be concerned for my loved ones, my fellow workers who don't yet know Christ."

And I can guarantee you one thing -- if you share Christ with other people, and live a life that honors *Him*, then you will see "the elect" coming out of the woodwork.

AMEN.