

Prayer

I praise You, Lord Jesus Christ, my Saviour;
I confess to you the inadequacies of my spirit, soul and body;
I rejoice in the vision, the hope and the opportunities You have given me;
I honour Your Holy Name and the glorious power of Your love;
And I am glad I have found the truth in You: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Missions

Pray today for those who work in missions within Muslim countries, where it can be dangerous to speak the name of Christ. Pray for courage and pray for the protection for such missionaries.

On-going prayers

- *Seek the Lord's will about wasteful supermarket packaging*
- *Pray about the issue of worldwide financial regulation*
- *Give thanks for the blessing of eternal life in Christ*

Meditation

Stand guard, Lord Jesus, over our lips;
That we may speak the truth and declare what is wise.

Stand guard, Lord Jesus, over our eyes;
That we may choose to see what is good and rejoice in it.

Stand guard, Lord Jesus, over our hearts;
That we may have the discernment to do what is right.

Stand guard, Lord Jesus, over our minds;
That we may accept and enjoy both wisdom and learning.

Stand guard, Lord Jesus, over our hands;
That we may work to build Your glorious Kingdom.

And when we stand before You, Lord Jesus;
Reveal the truth, and save us from our sins.

Fulfil all faith and hope, and as we enter Your Glory;
May our souls be wrapped in Your love, for eternity.

Bible Study - Romans 9:6-18

⁶ For it is not as if the Word of God has failed. Not all who are born of the line of Israel are true Israelites, ⁷ and not all of Abraham's descendants are truly his children. On the contrary, 'your descendants will be named through Isaac.' ⁸ That is, not all of his natural children are the children of God, but only the children of promise can be counted as his descendants. ⁹ The words of the promise are this; 'I will return around this time of next year and Sarah will have a son.' ¹⁰ And not only this, but when Rebecca conceived children by one husband, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ before they were born or had done anything good or evil, (so that God's plan and choice should be upheld ¹² through His calling and not by human means) she was told, 'the older one will serve the younger.' ¹³ As it is written in Scripture, 'I have loved Jacob but I have no love for Esau.'

¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Of course not! ¹⁵ He said to Moses 'I will be merciful to those to whom I wish to be merciful, and I will show compassion to those to whom I wish to be compassionate.' ¹⁶ So it does not depend upon human will or exertion, but on the mercy of God ¹⁷ For example, Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I raised you up in order to show my power

through you and so that my name should be made known through all the earth. ¹⁸ So then, He has mercy on whoever He so wishes, and He hardens the hearts of those He so wishes.

Review

This passage of Scripture is difficult to read, because Paul uses examples from the Old Testament to make some points about God's justice and mercy, and it is difficult to follow what He says! There is one overriding theme governing everything, however, and if we keep this in mind, then we will follow his train of thought more easily. The whole passage is about the sovereign right of God to do whatever he wants in order to achieve His will. In addition to this, we should remember that when Paul speaks about God's 'will', he is referring to His plan to bring salvation to the whole world, and He does this through the history of His People and the work of the Messiah. Certainly, if we remember this and the fact that Paul was arguing against the Jews of his own day, then the passage will become more understandable. We will then find that we can spot some truths about the working of God's sovereign will today.

From the beginning of chapter 9, Paul has been concerned to explain why his own people, the Israelites, continued to reject the Messiah. Every traditional Jew who heard Paul speak would find what he was saying unacceptable; from their point of view Jesus did not conform to the Law and was not the Messiah. The only thing Paul could do to argue against this was to turn to the Jew's own Scripture, the Old Testament.

Now, as far as the Jews were concerned, God's blessing and was those who were the direct physical descendants of Abraham; and Paul used Scripture to show that this was not true. He proved from Scripture that physical descent from Abraham was not as straightforward as might be thought. Abraham had other children apart from Isaac (9:7f.), and when Isaac's wife Rebecca bore twins, only one of them, the younger twin Jacob, received the direct inheritance of God's covenant blessing (9:10-13). In both cases, God's will alone determined the blessing, and not physical descent alone in the case of both Abraham or Isaac (see Gen 21 and 27). Paul's argument was a bold move against presumptions held even to this day!

In addition to this, Paul quoted God's words to Moses (Ex 33:19) in the midst of the crisis when the People of Israel had begun to worship a golden calf in the desert, just after they had received the Law (9:15). Moses alone remained in God's favour, and interceded for the people, despite their sin, which according to the law, should have cut them off from God's favour forever! Scripture shows that they were saved not because of who they were but ultimately through God's mercy (see Exodus 33). Lastly, Paul quoted from the earlier part of Exodus (Ex 9:16) in which it is made clear that God works through even Pharaohs and foreign kings if it serves his will and His plan for the salvation of the world to do so.

What can we make of what Paul says, and what does it mean in the context of Romans as a whole? His wider point is that God's choice governs what happens, not any mechanism such as physical descent. He only works through those to whom He chooses to 'be merciful' (9:15,18). Secondly, Paul shows that although God has chosen to work through His people, this does not mean that He does not work through others who are not 'His people'. God is in charge of His plan, and goes about achieving it in whatever way He wishes; this indeed in what 'sovereignty' means!

The whole passage is about God's sovereign will, and it exposes many human weakness in understanding and applying Scripture. Israel's problem was that they did not understand what God had revealed to them, and they clung on, uncritically, to what they thought they knew. If we have read this passage carefully, we will note that it is a warning to us even today that we should not hold on to our own understanding of God's plans. He is bigger than us and we should always be ready to submit to His greater plan.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The descendants of Abraham
- Isaac and his two sons
- The example of Moses
- Pharaoh and the hard hearts

Going Deeper

We will now look at each of the examples taken by Paul in turn, and make sure that we understand what he means by using each of them. The arguments appear to be all about the identity of Jewish people, but there is still more for us to discover within the text.

Firstly, however, Paul refused to accept the suggestion that if the Jews reject their Messiah, God's plan had somehow failed. From that day to this, some believe that God simply transferred His allegiance from the 'Old Testament' people to the 'New Testament' emerging church. Others suggest that God's plan for salvation

through the Jews simply lapsed after the Exile (that is, after the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and all that followed this), so God started His work anew, centuries later, with those who responded to Christ by faith. Neither suggestion will do, for Paul says; 'it is not as if the Word of God has failed!' (9:6), so no such simple solution is available to us even in the New Testament.

The descendants of Abraham

Paul reminded the Jewish people that Abraham had at least two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was Abraham's favourite and the firstborn, though born to his wife's slave, Hagar (16:1f.). In order to make his point that both Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel, had misunderstood God's plans, he quoted from God's famous passage of Genesis in which God rebuked Abraham. When confronted by his wife Sarah about the due inheritance of his sons, Abraham prevaricated, and God had to tell Abraham to listen to his wife, adding: 'your descendants will be named through Isaac!'

The story of Ishmael's expulsion from the household of Abraham was distressing (Gen 21:15f.) but only because Abraham had not accepted God's previous word and promise (17:15f. as quoted in 9:9). This, perhaps, is part of Paul's point, for if God's people had accepted their Messiah, Jesus, then there would be no distress between Christian and Jew. However, the main point that Paul makes is this 'only children of the promise can be counted as his (Abraham's) descendants'. (9:8). When Paul talks about God's promise, he means the Covenant promises of God. The Covenant was both a promise of God's personal blessing, but also a promise that God would work through the Covenant to achieve blessing for the whole world (Gen 12:2,3), the plan of salvation.

Isaac and his two sons.

The situation is a little more complex with the story of Isaac and Rebecca and their two sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the older twin (just) and the favourite of his father, and Jacob was the younger and the favourite of his mother. Again, God overruled the normal human precedent of the inheritance of the father passing through the eldest, and elected to work through the younger Jacob, causing great turmoil and division in the whole family (Gen 27).

The point Paul makes from this story adds to what he has already said. God's right to choose who he wishes is emphasised by His favouring of the younger Jacob before they were born (9:11). This immediately makes us think of what Paul has just said in the previous chapter about God's prior choice of those whom he 'predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son' (8:29). It remains a great mystery to us as to why God appears to choose some people and not others, but the truth is that this is how he works and we have to work with the reality of how God works, and not waste our breath questioning it.

Biblically, this is nowhere more poignantly expressed than in the division between Jacob and Esau. These two represent their offspring, the people of Israel and the people of Edom respectively, and when Paul quotes 'the older one will serve the younger' (Gen 25:23) from the Lord's words of prophecy at their birth, it was not something that was fulfilled in their lifetime, for Esau never served Jacob; the two lived separate lives. The prophecy was fulfilled in later years when the nation of Edom became subservient to Israel (2 Sam 8:14, 1 Kings 22:47, 2 Kings 14:7 etc.).

The words 'I have loved Jacob but I have no love for Esau' in verse 13 are a quote from Malachi 1:2-3, which sum up God's sovereign right to choose. Some translations have 'I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau', but this is not helpful. We associate 'hate' with active vengeance, but the Greek word in Romans and the Hebrew word in Malachi are inactive words which merely stand for the absence of love; hence my translation. God has everything for Jacob and nothing for Esau; God's promises and His choice are inscrutable and we do not know the reasons for them; indeed, there is no reason for us to know.

The example of Moses

One can almost hear the chorus of complaint, for all this sounds unfair to us! Paul perceives what we so often fail to accept, which is that God has the right to do as He pleases because He is God. He has the right to do as He pleases and work according to His own plan. After the dreadful event when the people of Israel created a golden calf to worship, Moses was given a privileged look into this sovereign glory of God in the 'cleft of a rock' (Ex.33:17-23) and was given the words which sum up this authority of God; 'I will be merciful to those to whom I wish to be merciful, and I will show compassion to those to whom I wish to be compassionate.' (9:15). It is clear from the story that surrounds this incident that the reason why God acts like this is because of sin amongst His own people. Paul gives this example to say that the election of Israel as God's people does not automatically absolve them from sin!

It is so easy for any of us to place ourselves on the moral 'high ground' and claim that we know better than God; but we do not. This means that sometimes we will have to accept things which seem to us to be unfair, and also believe that God has His reasons for making choices that to us are unfathomable. Accepting this is part of what it means to know that God is truly God.

Pharaoh and the heard hearts

The last point made by Paul is more difficult and contentious. By quoting Exodus 9:16, Paul goes beyond the confines of a discussion about the nature and privileges of the people of Israel. He makes the point that in Israel's own history, God was capable of using even a foreign power (Egypt) to achieve His will; such was His power and control. It is not that God gave any privileges to such powers and authorities, for He used them without giving them the choice to respond to Him as He did to Abraham; but His control over the world was sufficient for Him to use them, nevertheless. Indeed, God used foreign powers to achieve His will on many occasions in the life of the people of Israel, as Isaiah clearly understood when calling a foreigner called Darius the Lord's 'anointed' (Is 45:1 – Darius was a Persian King who set the people of Israel free from the bondage of Exile in Babylon).

What Paul insisted was that the Jewish people who objected to the Gospel He preached claimed an exclusive right to say what God would and would not do, and through whom he would or would not do it. As far as Paul was concerned, the Gospel was God's choice. He had chosen the Messiah, one of His own people, to do His will and achieve His plan of salvation. The fact that God made this choice against all human understanding was, he said, consistent with the Scriptures. In addition, God's plans had always included people who were outside the boundaries of 'God's people', and it should be no surprise to Jewish people that God wanted to reach out to all people. Furthermore, the example of the story of Moses made it clear that God's people were not free of sin, and would not necessarily do God's will. They were as adept at sin as anyone!

Application

It is increasingly obvious that Paul is not saying much about the Gospel or about the Jewish people in this passage; his main aim is to describe the sovereign nature of God. Paul tells his readers that if they understand the supreme nature of God as Creator, then many of the questions they have about the Gospel will be resolved.

Sometimes we can fathom good reasons why this or that happens in the world, but sometimes we cannot. The fact remains that God does not just reveal Himself to everyone all the time and do His work of salvation and restoration all in one go. He has chosen to bless the world and restore it through people, and to work from one person to another and from generation to generation, and He makes His own choices about how to fulfil His plan by these means. Certainly, He makes promises to those who respond to Him; these go back to promises made to Abraham and His descendants, and although things change because people are imperfect, God does not go back on His promises.

There is no way for us to avoid the fact that God chooses to reveal Himself in some times and places today, and not in others. How the Jewish people fit into God's eternal plan is something we will have to wait to find out, later on in chapter 11. However, the way we practice our faith and go about our evangelistic task in the world is based upon our understanding of God, and as we continue our study of Romans, we will find out that Paul comments on this quite specifically in chapter 10. In the mean time, it is perhaps necessary for God's people to realise that they do not have control over God. God has control over them, and ultimately, over all things.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you understand all the examples from Scripture given by Paul? Discuss the specific points made by each example in this passage.
2. Do we have the intellectual right to understand what God is doing? Why is it that He allows us to understand some things and not others?
3. Can you give examples of those to whom God has been generously merciful, and those for whom He has hardened their hearts?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Over the years I have struggled with the sovereignty of God. People speak about this too easily, as if they can ask God to act in 'sovereignty' to overcome the laws of nature and do a work of power for some reason, perhaps to heal someone. But if we use the word solely in this way we lose sight of what sovereignty means; God will do exactly what He wants, and not according to our attempts to 'pull His strings'. We cannot

persuade Him to act with sovereign power – this is a contradiction in terms! When we yield to the fact that God is truly sovereign, then we find ourselves in a new place of discipleship.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *What kind of picture do you have of God? Do you feel that you know all you need to know about Him? Alternatively, is He a complete mystery to you? If it is some balance between these two (as I might expect), then what determines the balance? By thinking about these questions, you may feel that you should move one way or the other in how you understand the awesome majesty of God.*
- *Ask the Lord God to work truly with sovereign power amongst His people today. Ask this without any preconceptions and ask Him to do whatever He wants to bring about His salvation in the world, for this is His will.*

Final Prayer

Great God of Wonders, display Your power amongst us! Do whatever miracles you judge right, O Lord, but perform the greatest miracle of all, and save the souls of people, many people; and may we who are called by Your name be faithful to the task of supporting this Your work. Through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour: AMEN
