



# LET GOD BE GOD

*SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY*

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Romans 9:1-33

20th Message

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In the ninth chapter of the book of Romans we come to one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament. Almost every commentator that I have read has different views on what this chapter is saying. The text has things that we cannot fully understand, and there may be issues on which we disagree, but that is all right.

I will begin by quickly reviewing what we have already learned in Romans. In the first two and a half chapters of this book the apostle Paul describes the terrible plight of mankind. It's a grim picture. All of mankind is guilty, hopelessly lost in sin, and living under the wrath of God. We are sinful, self-centered and separated from our Creator. Paul clearly shows us our *need for justification*. Over the next two and a half chapters he goes on to explain the way of *justification*. Jesus Christ came to earth and became the sin-bearer. Our sins were placed upon him and he bore them in his own body on the cross. Now, by believing in him, we are delivered from our sins. We are declared "Not guilty!" and given the gift of righteousness. We don't have to worry about the guilt of the past; sin's power over us is broken in the present, and we don't have to worry about the future: death no longer holds us in its grip. That is the good news. Then, in chapters 6 through 8, Paul reveals the process that God uses to bring believers into a mature relationship with him.

Everything slows down in chapter 9, however. Many people skip these difficult sections and move right on to chapter 12. But it will be helpful to understand what is behind this complicated part of Romans, and why Paul appears to take a little detour. As we will see, it is not a detour at all.

For two thousand years, Israel was God's instrument to proclaim the good news to the world that God loves mankind. In the ancient world, people were afraid of God. They even sacrificed their children to appease him. To let people know that he loved them, God called into being one nation. They would be his missionaries to proclaim to the world that God cared about people very much. Over the span of two thousand years that was the Jews' mission to the world. Finally, God himself came to earth in the form of a Jew: Immanuel, God with us. God became an Israelite. He lived among mankind and died for us. What a wonderful announcement that is!

When Paul finally understood that good news he wanted to proclaim it to his countrymen, so he went from synagogue to synagogue preaching it. He would take out the Torah scroll, or the Isaiah scroll, and preach. But people didn't respond positively. Some got very angry at what he had to say and had him ushered out the front door. On several occasions he was stoned. Paul wondered why the Jews hated him. The very people whom God had chosen to announce the good news were rejecting the gospel. So

Paul took to the streets with the gospel. Finding a Roman businessman or any passerby who would listen, he would chat with him about the good news. Oftentimes, wanting to hear more, the person would ask Paul over to his home. He would invite all his neighbors to hear the apostle share the good news of God's love, and all kinds of people responded eagerly to the gospel.

Paul wondered why his own people would not accept what he had to share, while the Gentiles had no difficulty with it. He had to rethink all his theology. Thus, here in chapters 9-11 of Romans is his explanation of why his countrymen failed to believe the gospel. He explains to them that God was moving the Jews off the center stage of world history and moving in another group, a new Israel.

Paul begins by sharing his anguish of heart and perplexity of mind. The people of Israel, with all their unique privileges, had rejected their own Messiah. How could the favored people of God have failed to recognize their Messiah? How could he reconcile their unbelief with God's covenant and promises? And what about their future? If God's love had been poured out upon the nations in general, and if God's concern was to work through the church, the new Israel of God, what about the old Israel of God? Did God still have a plan for them?

Listen to what the anguished Paul has to say:

**I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh (Rom 9:1-3, NASB).**

Paul wants to assert once and for all that God has not rejected his people. He loves them with all his heart. In fact, the apostle expresses his willingness to give up his salvation if it meant they could be saved. Those of us with loved ones that are lost know something of this pain. We may enjoy their company, but we always feel a deep anguish underneath. I have to confess that this verse leaves me convicted. I don't love people the way Paul did. But that is the heart of God, a broken heart, because people don't respond to his love. That was the heart of Paul, too, because his people, his fellow Jews, refused the gospel.

Paul goes on to explain some of the unique privileges of the old Israel. Romans 9:4-5:

**who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons** [They were God's adopted children. Hosea wrote, "God said, out of Egypt I have called my son." In Jeremiah, God said, "I am Israel's father."] **and the glory** [the cloud of fire that was suspended over the tabernacle by day, and the pillar of fire at night, which represented the presence of God, the visible splendor of God]

**and the covenants** [those great agreements that God made with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and all the renewals of those agreements: that he would give them a land, that he would bless them and that through them the seed would come] **and the giving of the Law** [they were given the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai, that unique revelation of God's will, spoken by his voice and written by God himself] **and the temple service** [centered around the sacrifice of the lamb, which symbolized the coming of the Lamb of God who would one day take away the sin of the world] **and the promises**, [and especially those promises that he would bring the seed, the promised Messiah, through the nation] **whose are the fathers**, [Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve sons of Jacob, and many others] **and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.**

Last but not least, God himself came through the nation of Israel in the form of a man, the long-awaited Messiah. One would think that with all of these eight benefits, Israel would recognize and welcome her Messiah. But they didn't. This is what broke Paul's heart. But, says the apostle, in spite of the fact that Israel rejected their missionary call, God's program did not go astray. Everything is intact. God is not wringing his hands, wondering how he is going to get the job done.

So how can we reconcile Israel's privileges with her prejudices? How can we explain her hard heart? Paul now addresses this mystery, asking a series of questions in the process. First, in verses 6-13, he asks, "Has God's promise failed?"

**But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "Through Isaac your descendants will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. For this is a word of promise: "At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son." And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated." (Rom 9:6-13)**

If God promised to bless Israel, and they forfeited the blessing by not believing, has God's promise failed? Not at all, says the apostle. Here Paul declares that there always have been two Israels: the physical descendants of Israel or Jacob, on the one hand, and on the other, his spiritual offspring. God's promise has always been given to the latter, who did receive it. In chapter 2, Paul has already made that distinction between those who were Jews outwardly, whose circumcision was only in the body, and those who were Jews inwardly and were circumcised in the heart by the Spirit.

Here the apostle elaborates on and illustrates this with a history lesson. He reminds us of what happened when God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees and brought him to the land that we call Israel today. God

promised Abraham a son, and said that he was going to work through that son. Abraham and Sarah tried to have a child, but they remained childless. Finally, they became too old to have children. They did what was perfectly acceptable in that culture. Sarah gave Abraham Hagar, her handmaiden, a slave girl, and Abraham had a child, Ishmael, through her. They thought that this was the child of promise, but God told them, "No. That isn't the one! Stop trying to help me out. Sarah will have a child." Then God took Abraham out beneath the night sky and asked him if he could count the stars. God promised him that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars of the heavens. And the text says, "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." God regenerated their bodies and opened Sarah's womb. She gave birth to a boy, whom they named Isaac. God said that he would work through Isaac, not Ishmael, to get the message out to the nations.

Isaac married Rebekah, and she gave birth to twin boys. Esau was born first and then came Jacob. Normally the firstborn would inherit all the privileges, but God said that before the children were even born, before they had a chance to establish any merit, to do anything good or bad, God said, "the older will serve the younger." God turned history on its head. He is God and he has the right to do that. He could have chosen Esau (that would have been the natural choice), but he didn't. He chose to work through Jacob.

Paul is saying that down through history, God in his sovereignty chooses those through whom he will work. He worked through Abraham, through Isaac and through Jacob to get the gospel out. David Roper<sup>1</sup> wisely notes that in this text, Paul's primary concern is not election to salvation. Paul is talking about national entities, or individuals, or whomever God chooses to work through to get the gospel out to the world. The text that Paul picks from Malachi makes that very clear: "*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.*" That sounds terrible! How could the God who loves people hate Esau? But Malachi is not referring to an individual. He is talking about the nations that sprang from their loins, the Israelites, whom he calls Jacob, and the Edomites, whom he calls Esau. God has chosen to work through Israel, not Edom. "Hate" is a Hebrew idiom for preference. Jesus used the same idiom when he said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). Jesus was not suggesting that we should hate our parents. He was saying that our love for God should be so intense that at times it may appear that we hate our parents. That is what Malachi had in mind: that God chose Jacob, he chose Israel. Paul is saying that God has the right to move an individual, or a group of individuals, off the center stage and move another group on. If he chooses to work through Isaac instead of Israel, that's all right. If he chooses to work through Jacob and Esau, that's all right. If he chooses to work through Israel and not Edom, that's his prerogative. God has the right to do that.

Next, Paul anticipates some objections to what he has written.

**What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will**

have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. (Rom 9:14-18)

The next question follows naturally. We object at this point because it seems unjust of God to make what appear to be arbitrary choices. Is God unjust to exercise his sovereign choices? Choosing some for salvation and passing by others seems like a violation of justice. But, Paul defends God’s justice by proclaiming his mercy. This doesn’t seem to follow, but it does. John Stott writes, “the question itself is misconceived, because the basis on which God deals savingly with sinners is not justice but mercy.”<sup>2</sup> The illustration that God uses is the redemption of his people out of Egypt. Throughout the Old Testament, this idea of Israel being brought miraculously out of Egypt is an illustration of salvation, of the redemption of an individual.

Paul summarizes how God delivered Israel from Egypt. He did this through two very different men, Moses and Pharaoh. God had mercy on Moses and he hardened the heart of Pharaoh. The passage that Paul quotes here comes from Exodus 33. Moses was a timid, insecure man. He did not want to be the deliverer of Israel, but God pushed him into it. A known murderer, Moses went reluctantly, counting on God. He was the instrument God used to deliver the nation. He had mercy on Moses and revealed his character to him. That was what enabled Moses to become the man whom God used to deliver the nation of Israel.

What happened to Pharaoh? As the king of the ancient world at the time he thought he was a god. Moses said to him, “God says to let my people go,” but Pharaoh refused; he hardened his heart. When a plague struck the land he changed his mind, but then he hardened his heart again. Finally, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart irrevocably so that he could no longer soften his heart. Why did God do that? As Pharaoh continued to harden his heart, God then hardened his heart, and that became the means of delivering Israel out of Egypt. Paul says these are two historic examples. God has the right to do as he pleases. He has the right to show mercy on one individual, and use him to bring salvation to his people, and to harden the heart of another.

Paul anticipates another objection at this point, so he asks a third question:

**You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” (Rom 9:19)**

That appears to be a valid question. If God blesses one person to bring salvation to his people, and if hardens the heart of another to save his people, if either of these men stand before God at some point in the future, they are going to say that they didn’t have any choice in the matter. In other words, is it fair of God to hold people accountable to him when he makes the decisions? Notice that Paul doesn’t answer that question, because this is really not the question. There is an underlying question that he addresses. Verse 20:

**On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? Or**

**does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? (Rom 9:20-21)**

Paul is not trying to stifle sincere questions, but, rather, to put in his place one who wants to “quarrel” or “talk back” to God. It is that spirit of rebellion that refuses to allow God to be God and acknowledge one’s status as a sinful creature that the apostle is addressing. We must also state that Paul is not saying that we are pieces of inanimate clay. He is simply taking an illustration out of ordinary life and saying, wouldn’t it be ludicrous if, instead of making a piece of fine china out of a lump of clay, the potter decided to make a common vase, and the vase said, “You don’t have any right to do that. I am the one who determines what I should be”? Paul is not saying that God treats us that way. He is simply drawing an analogy from life. Just as a potter has the right to determine what form the clay will take, so God has the right to deal with sinful humanity according to both his wrath and his mercy. Paul is saying that God is sovereign. No one coerces him. No one tells him what to do. No one counsels him.

Paul now asks a hypothetical question:

**What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. (Rom 9:22-24)**

At times we wonder why God seems to withhold judging ungodly men and women. Does God have the right to tolerate evil so that his glory is displayed through it in his people? Does he have the right to tolerate evil so that Jews and Gentiles may come into a relationship with him? What if he permits evil men to rise to positions of power if that draws people into the love of God?

David Roper illustrates this truth well in one of his messages on Romans. He asks, “What if in the near future God allowed a totalitarian atheistic government. And they padlocked all the churches. And they put all pastors in prison. And they burned all the Bibles. And they passed laws forbidding people from talking about God. They went about expunging all mention of God from literature. And we had a completely atheistic totalitarian regime. Suppose that happens? What do you think would be the result?”<sup>3</sup> Well, we can predict what would happen, because that is what happened in China after the unleashing of Mao’s Red Guard and Christians by the thousands were slaughtered and church buildings destroyed. Thousands came to Christ during that time. Today, there are more Christians in China than in any other place in the world. Does God have the right to do that? Does he have the right to allow a Hitler, a Stalin, or a Mussolini to rise to power? Does he have the right to raise up that sort of government in order to produce good. Yes, he does! That is the apostle’s point.

God has the right to harden the nation of Israel after they have repeatedly hardened their hearts to the gospel. It is not that God dislikes the Jews; it is that he has the right to move this national entity off stage and put another group of missionaries into a position of prominence and give them the opportunity to proclaim the gospel so that both Jews and Gentiles can be brought in.

In case there is any question about God's right to do this, Paul quotes two Old Testament prophets, Isaiah and Hosea, who predicted before the time that this is exactly what would happen (verses 25-30).

This brings Paul to ask one final question:

**What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, "Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed." (Rom 9:30-33)**

What a picture! The analogy that Paul uses of a huge rock (representing Christ) that is embedded in the ground is used by Isaiah and others in the Old Testament. That is the way Jesus is. He is that immovable stone of stumbling. Jesus is right there in the middle of the road of life. Those who insist on resting on their own righteousness refuse to see it and stumble over it headlong to destruction, but others come and rest on it by faith and find salvation. Those are the only two options: you either fall over Jesus or you take your stand upon him. But he is available to all, Jew and Gentile alike. If you believe in him and what he has done for you, then you are included. Scripture never says, try to determine if you are chosen. It says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31); and, "to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (Jn 1:12). That is the good news, the gospel.

If I could leave you with one exhortation this morning it would be this: Let God be God! He has that right. Stop second-guessing God. Stop fighting him. Stop running away from him. Stop trying to be in control of all the events in your life. That was the message that came to Job after all

his suffering. God is in control. He reigns. He is the final authority and arbiter. Nothing happens outside of his control. Nothing takes him by surprise. He is working relentlessly in history. The wheels have not fallen off his program. He is still at work to bring salvation to the world. God has the right to tolerate some evil that comes into your life that he will use to draw you closer to him. We may cry out to him to remove some circumstance or person from our life, but God says, "No. I am going to tolerate that evil. I will use it to draw you closer to me." And, viewed in terms of eternity, that "light, momentary, affliction is working an exceeding weight of glory." God has the right to do that.

Heavenly Father, I confess that I stand in awe of you this morning. You selected me. You chose me. I wasn't looking for you, but you found me. It is obvious that you called me and wooed me. You brought me to a place where I could hear the clear call of the gospel message. You softened my heart. I can't say that I made an agonized decision of my will. You just put me into your family. There are more than five billion people on this earth, and you chose me. I don't deserve it. Thank you!

*But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy...* (Titus 3:4-5)

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1. *How Odd of God to Eschew the Jew*. A sermon by David H. Roper (Cole Community Church, Boise Idaho, 4/17/1998).

2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 268.

3. Roper.

I am indebted to David Roper for his insights into this passage.