

ROMANS BIBLE STUDY

Romans 9:01-13

Lesson #25

Introduction

Well, here we are. We're at Romans chapter 9. This chapter was one of the primary chapters of the bible that molded and reshaped my perspectives on God and man and the nature of the relationship between us. My former concept was that God and man were both members of a team, and each had something that the other didn't, and when we worked together, each supplying our particular part, then we could accomplish something that neither of us could do alone. Under this concept, God provided the justification and we provided the faith, and when combined in a synergistic effort, salvation was achieved. I was taught this from my initial conversion, and later taught it myself. Now, in retrospect I don't understand how I could have made such an error, because my own conversion was a classic example of just the opposite. I knew painfully well that I didn't have control over what my mind believed, and cried to God repeatedly that it wasn't fair of Him to demand something from me that I didn't have the ability to do. I knew from the moment of my conversion that my faith, meaning my true belief, was an act of God alone. I didn't supply the faith, God gave me the faith, as a gift. (Eph 2:8-9) And yet I succumbed to the teachings of those whom I trusted, who told me that I just finally chose to believe of my own "free will." I knew better then, and I know much better now; but then I was just a babe in Christ and I wasn't willing to question the teachings of my elders. Probably, at the time, this was the right attitude, but babies are intended to eventually grow up and learn to think and discern for themselves. And when we do grow up we're responsible to correct any errors that we were taught as children so that they aren't passed on to our own children. I wish I could say that we're doing a better job of that. But, superficial teaching, coupled with virtually nonexistent personal bible study, has fostered a church that's still like little babies in their knowledge of God and understanding of the truth. And they seem to like it like this.

If we ask ourselves how can these things be, how can error become so entrenched in Christian teaching? we have to look all the way back to that concept from which all the resultant perspectives derive. Before Satan rebelled against God he was the leading angel. And what was his error, he dared to think of himself as an equal to God. He lost the right perspective of the relationship, and in his mind he demoted God to angelic status and elevated himself to God status. He dared think of himself as a partner or an equal, or at least semi-equal. From this singular flawed perspective all the rest of his actions came about. When he lost sight of the vast difference between the Creator and the created he was set on a path to certain destruction. The loss of understanding of the absolute sovereignty and transcendent uniqueness of God will result in endless ideas and deadly flawed perspectives that will have the same results for man that they had for Satan. This can rightly be argued as the source of most, if not all, of the flawed concepts and aberrant teachings about God that fill the whole world today. We dare to hold God accountable to our own concepts, and accuse Him of unfairness or unrighteousness when He makes sovereign choices and decisions that affect those things that He's created, especially us humans. We dare to think of ourselves as semi-equals to God, with equal rights and rightful expectations of our own. I'll speak more of this in the next few lessons, with some quotes from very respected authors of the past.

As we read through this chapter we're going to see that it's absolutely impossible to accept it at face value unless we have the proper understanding of the sovereignty of God over all that He's created, and rightly understand the nature of this relationship between Him and us. Otherwise we'll think that we have to make excuses for God, and we'll force twisted interpretations that don't fit the obvious meaning of the verses. And this is the common practice. To read the verses and then, with many words and much rhetoric, explain why we don't think they really mean just exactly what they plainly say. Even when I was still young in Christ I realized when a teacher was doing this. When he would read the verses and then proceeded to explain why they really meant just the opposite of what they actually said. Now let's stipulate that the scriptures are sometimes complex, and we don't always interpret them correctly at first, so we've been given teachers who are gifted with understanding to help us get it right. (Acts 18:26; Eph 4:11-13) But when it's explained correctly it both makes sense and literally complies with the words of scripture. If it doesn't do both, don't trust it, but if it does then accept it as the word of God, even if it requires an adjustment in your preconceived notions. Many such adjustments will probably be required over the lifetime of those who believe and seriously study the holy scriptures. So, don't resist them, embrace them, and learn and grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ and God the Father, because this is what the scriptures were given to do, to teach us, to reprove us, to correct wrong thinking, and to instruct us in righteousness. (2Tim 3:16-17)

But before he gets into the real meat of the subject, Paul sets the stage so to speak. The first 5 verses of chapter nine are a kind of lead in to what's about to follow. They set the stage first for the immediate verses following, and then later for the next two chapters, 10 & 11. They acknowledge the rejection by the nation of Israel of their long awaited Messiah, and the cost of this rejection. In these verses Paul pours out his heart for his own nation over what they had done, but then builds further on that same theme. I'm going to call this entire group of lessons from chapter nine "The Sovereignty of God." But each lesson will have its own subtitle as well. I've taken the subtitle of this lesson from verses 6-9.

The Sovereignty of God (Pt.1) **Children of Flesh vs Children of Promise**

Reading first set of verses, 1-5:

1 I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, 2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, 4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, 5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. Romans 9:1-5 (NASB)

After his most beautiful concluding epilogue in verses 31-39 of chapter 8, Paul now reflects on the significance and tragedy of the rejection of Israel of their promised Messiah. He aptly expresses his heartbreak for his own people over such a loss. He uses a bit of hyperbole, an exaggeration for effect, when he says that he could even wish that he himself were accursed if it would result in their redemption and restoration. However, the truth is, that nobody who has experienced the saving grace of God, through the gift of faith (meaning belief) would be willing to exchange it for anything or anyone. The gift of faith transcends the value of anything and everything this earthly realm can possibly offer, to those who have it and understand just what it is that they have. They have a gift from God that is utterly unobtainable by any power or means existent in this created universe. If you truly believe in Jesus Christ as the unique and only Lord and Savior of all, then you believe that because you received the ability to do so from God, according to His own sovereign choice. You did not come to believe this simply by an act of your own free will, or a choice you made with your own faculties. Even though both of these are involved in the process because God's gift of faith works in and through these very parts. We **believe** and we **choose** because we receive the gift of saving faith from God, that's both **how** and **why** we do. (Eph 2:8-9; Rom 8:29-30)

Paul understands this very well, in fact that truth is at the very heart of his preaching, and especially forthcoming in this chapter. After he acknowledges the rejection of Israel, he begins to explain how this can happen, if indeed the Jews really are God's chosen people. Were the Jews lying, or had God reneged on His earlier promises of eternal love and prosperity for His chosen people? How could they reject Him, and even more to the point, how could He allow that to happen if He really was who He said He was, the genuine Son of God? Is God powerless to prevent man from constantly ruining His great plans? Is He constantly playing catch-up to repair man's mistakes? Is that how it is with God?

That's certainly how it is with us human beings, we're constantly fixing what went wrong with our plans, and making adjustments to try to get it back on track. Rarely, if ever does a complex, long term plan made by man unfold without a single hitch. So we readily accept this as a matter of fact. But does God have the same problems with His plans? After all, His are very long term, and immensely complex, so is it possible for Him to avoid any errors of any kind? Doesn't He ever have to make at least some small course adjustments to keep the whole thing on track? Is it possible for God to design a plan in advance, from beginning to end, and then put people into that plan who have the freedom to make their own choices every day, and not have to constantly correct the plan to account for mans actions? Impossible you say, and from mans perspective I would wholehearted agree, but does God have man's limitations, that's really the question isn't it? And these questions bring us to the overall title of this group of lessons, the sovereignty of God.

Just how powerful and knowledgeable is God, and just how involved is He in the day to day, moment by moment happenings of this whole creation, and man in particular? What are His limitations, or better yet does He even have any limitations at all? The knee jerk reaction is to proclaim "no, none at all." But that's not true. The scriptures tell us that God cannot lie, and He cannot act unrighteously, and other things as well. But what about His relationship to man?

To what extent, if any, does God involve Himself in the choices and actions of human beings, and what are the means by which He exercises His control and at the same time allows men to choose their own actions?

Perhaps we must first determine what we believe that the bible teaches concerning these questions. Does God do this, does He both control every action, in some manner of speaking, and yet at the same time allow men to make their own decisions? To do this would require a depth of understanding of how human beings think and behave, and a means of influential control that exceeds anything we humans have ever achieved. But does this exceed God's limitations? Are men so complex and diverse that God himself doesn't know exactly how or why we do the things that we do? Do we boggle God's mind with our vast complexities of feelings, and emotions, and desires?

Or, did God pre-design all of these things as essential and intentional parts of our make up? And did He pre-design them to work exactly according to His own intentions to accomplish His intended purposes? This preacher asserts that the scriptures teach this - that God began with a specific and complete plan to accomplish a desired purpose, and then He created all things that will ever exist in such a manner that each would do exactly what it was designed to do in order to accomplish that purpose, and they would all do it willingly. This is sheer genius, it could only be done by God, and it is without debate the clear implication of scriptures. Let me give some examples:

8 "Remember this, and be assured; Recall it to mind, you transgressors. 9 "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, 10 Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not [yet] been done, 11 Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it. (Isaiah 46:8-11)

12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

Heb 4:12-13 (NASB)

64 "But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. 65 And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."

John 6:63-65 (NASB)

We know that theology cannot be built on just a handful of verses, but neither can theology be correct if it contradicts any verses. So, whatever our overall theology might be, it must accommodate, and conform to, these verses we've just referenced. These verses say that God is the only God that exists, there is no other, and that He knows and declares the ending of everything from the very beginning because He planned it all before He ever created anything. That He knows the very thoughts and intentions of the hearts and minds of man, and not one thing (thought or action) escapes His eyes. They say that Jesus knew from the beginning who would believe and who would not, and even more amazingly, that no one can come to Him, in saving faith, unless that ability has been specifically granted to them by God the Father. This is what the scriptures declare, and our theology must match it or our theology is wrong.

Now, to get back on point, We've been discussing the issue of how and why the nation of Israel could have rejected their Messiah, and how God could have allowed such a thing to happen. I hope we can now see that it didn't happen in spite of God's plan for Israel, but rather as a specifically pre-designated part of God's intended plan for Israel. Israel's rejection was by their own choosing and doing, and they bear the responsibility for that, but at the very same time it was an integral part of the plan of redemption for all the Gentile nations whom God had promised would all be blessed by the future offspring of Abraham (meaning Jesus). I hope we can understand that the sovereign God of creation has planned something extraordinary, and He has cast very many parts in the accomplishment of that plan. There are heroes and there are villains, and every part has a character cast into it to play that part and to perform that portion. There is Jesus and there is Satan, there is Moses and there is Pharaoh, there is Daniel and there is Nebuchadnezzar, there is Peter and there is Judas, and all willingly perform their pre-designated part in God's extraordinary plan to create a suitable mate for His Son and a family of eternal worshipers for Himself. That is the plan, everything else whatsoever is the means of accomplishment. Yes, the implications are enormous, and we'll address them later, but now, to the next verses:

Verses 6-9:

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; 7 nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac your descendants will be named." 8 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. 9 For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son."

Immediately Paul makes it clear that Israel's rejection of their Messiah was not a failure of the word of God. The simplistic view is that God failed to keep His promise to the offspring of Abraham. But who was that promise of blessing made to? Was it to every flesh and blood descendant, or was it to just a specific portion of those descendants? Paul reminds us that it was to the specific line of Isaac, whom God loved and chose to be the recipients of that promise.

Then Paul makes an interesting distinction. He says *it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants*. We all probably know the story. Because many years passed after God told Abraham that he would have a son, Sarah persuaded him to take one of her servant girls and produce a child with her, and in this manner they sought to fulfil God's promise by their own initiative. The result was Ishmael, the child of the fleshly actions of Abraham and Sarah, not the child of the promise of God that was still to come. That genetic lineage, Ishmael, was not the one that God promised to bless even though they were Abraham's fleshly offspring. The lineage of the promise was through Isaac, who represents the child of faith in God's word, and who would eventually be born many years after Ishmael. The point is that the children of the promise of God's blessing are only a select portion, a chosen remnant, of the total overall descendants of Abraham. But the verses continue on, and what they say next is as shocking as it is revealing. What it says next contradicts everything that most of the world, and even most of what calls itself Christianity, think we know about our relationship with God and our own innate capabilities and our own sense of importance and personal rights in the sight of God. Many of us won't like what we're about to hear, and many will seek to twist it to mean something different, or at least to lessen its impact. But either way, we're going to read it, and then discuss what the words mean and what's being said. Let each man and woman hear the scriptures and carefully decide just what they're saying.

Verses 10-13:

10 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; 11 for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, 12 it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." 13 Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Well there we have it. If these three verses are carefully considered, and the inescapable implications pondered, we are left with a situation that we can't explain if we hold to the idea that everyone is the captain of their own soul and the master of their own fate. If we believe that the ending of the story of our lives are still being written, and our destinies are still up for grabs, then these three verses are absolutely impossible to reconcile. These verses don't say that every choice we will ever make is already made for us, rather, they imply that every choice we will ever freely make has already been ordained by God before creation began. They don't imply direct force, they reveal intrinsic pre-designed control built into the very genetic design of humanity. The idea that our own actions, or our own will, determine our final outcome is destroyed entirely by the clear and unmistakable example of Jacob and Esau. God made a personal choice of who He loved and who He hated before they were even born, and before they had ever done anything, good or bad, whatsoever. Like it or not, this is what these verses say, is it not? And does it, or does it not say, that this was done for the express intention of making it clear to everybody that it was not man's actions or intentions, but God's choice alone that determines the final outcome of every single creature? Yes, that is exactly what it says, and there is no possibility of explaining it away or mitigating the implications. The whole point of this verse is to make it absolutely and irrefutably clear that God is sovereign in the lives of men, and He himself actively and deliberately determines who will know His love and who will know His wrath according to His own desire and purpose. There is no possible way to extract any other meaning from these verses, because they are so totally clear and understandable that debate over their meaning is rendered absurd. And this is precisely what causes the problem, the clarity of them causes us the problem, because we can't pretend that we don't understand, but at the same time, we aren't always prepared to accept the truth that they convey.

We feel that this makes us merely God's puppets, robotic creatures running on a track that we didn't get to pick. This is offensive to us, and worse it seems to blemish our perspective of a loving and righteous God who would never enforce His will on anybody, would He? From our point of view it seems to make God an arbitrary and heartless overlord. But wait a minute, is there another point of view besides ours? Does God's point of view matter? Is God entitled to a point of view that might seem opposed to our point of view? In every earthly debate and negotiation each side argues their case from their own particular point of view. This is nothing new, and each side probably believes its perspective is just and fair, even if they are in opposition to each other. So why don't we see that there is a fair and reasonable side to God's perspective that might not, at least initially, seem right and fair to us from our perspective? We seem to think that if God's point of view differs from ours then obviously God must be wrong, and something is amiss with Him. Do you see the absurd irony of this reasoning? If God declares something in clear and unmistakable terms, and we think this is wrong or unfair, then who is mistaken, God or us? If you believe that everybody gets to make their own choice of believing or not believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior entirely by their own choosing, entirely apart from God's sovereign predestined election, then you cannot possibly believe that these words in Romans 9, verses 10-13 are true. These are mutually exclusive theologies. It's either one or it's the other, or its neither, but it cannot be both. Man's choices do not determine or contradict God's predestination, it is exactly the reverse, God's predestination determines and then empowers man's eventual wilful choices. God predestines, and then man willingly chooses to act accordingly.

Yes, this causes many difficulties for us, it did for myself for many years also. But careful study, and the wise council of godly teachers can bring clarity, and with that clarity a renewed awe and respect and appreciation for God, and a more proper understanding of the relationship that really exists. Understanding these verses, and accepting them as truth, exalts God to the heavens and humbles man to the depths. Understanding God's sovereignty reveals His manifold mercy and lovingkindness to an unworthy and totally helpless sinner. This understanding is essential to true and acceptable worship. We do not worship a partner who helped and encouraged us to climb out of hell, but a rescuer who pulled a helpless victim, unable to assist in any way, from a sure and certain hell fire. We could only be somewhat grateful to an assistant, but we can fall at the feet of a rescuer and give Him all the credit and all the glory. And so it is with man, we must fully and rightly understand where we were, and how utterly hopeless our situation was, to rightly appreciate what Jesus Christ has done for us. We must understand that our redemption was a predestined gift, not simply a human choice, and it was made by God in eternity past, long before we experienced it in time and space. Yes, we do choose to believe, and we do choose to follow Jesus, but that choice was predestined from before creation (Eph 1:4) and came about in time because we received the gift of saving faith (Eph 2:8) by which we do believe and do follow in willing and joyful subjection. It is a gift of God, and not by works specifically so that no one can take pride in their own accomplishments. (Eph 2:9-10)

I understand that there may be some Arminian friends listening to this lesson, and please let me say that I myself was one of you for 20 years, but the bible simply does not support that theological perspective, as these verses plainly declare. Paul says *so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls*, What does he mean by this? It isn't vague at all, is it? It means that God's ultimate purpose for His creation is the determining factor in the destiny of all humanity; man's actions and choices are not the determining factor but conversely the predetermined **means** by which God systematically accomplishes His purpose through the willing choices of every individual. Later in this epistle Paul will declare: *Oh, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!* (Rom 11:33) How does God create billions of individual beings, over thousands of years of time, who will all freely choose to do exactly what He has predestined them to do, to accomplish His final plan to produce a family of eternal worshipers? I don't know the answer to this, and neither do you, but is this too difficult for God? Well, Not according to Him it isn't. (Isa 46:8-11) He says He planned it all in advance, and He says He (not we) will bring it about. And this includes both the salvation of some and the judgement of others.

Now at this point I want to make a further distinction that this verse brings out. The original example of children of flesh versus children of promise started with the example of Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac was the child of faith and Ishmael the child of flesh. But take notice of what happens next. The next distinction isn't between the children of Ishmael and the children of Isaac, but rather within the very same family. Esau and Jacob were both the children of Isaac, and yet God says that He loved Jacob but He hated Esau. So clearly, just being in the right genealogy wasn't enough to assure God's favor, there was still a distinction, still only a remnant even among the descendants of Isaac and Jacob. This was a critical distinction

that the Jews of that time failed to catch. They assumed their genealogy alone assured their salvation, and John the Baptist rebuked them severely for that. Remember what happened when some Pharisees and Sadducees came to him for baptism:

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father"; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. (Mat 3:7-9) There is no such thing as genealogical salvation, or national salvation, or family salvation, or group salvation, or church membership salvation.

Now I want to move into verse 13, but that verse is going to take a lot of examination to capture, and I think it will demand a full lesson of its own, or even more than one. So let's summarize what we've read so far and close here for now.

Conclusion:

In summary we've read that Israel's rejection of Jesus as their long awaited Messiah was not a surprise to God, nor did it require Him to alter His predetermined plan for creation and eternity. Israel rejected Jesus by their own choice, and they rightly stand accountable because they were told He was coming and He proved Himself with many miracles, but overriding all of that there is God's sovereign ordination and predestination of all things from before creation.

Then we read that our final disposition (which we often call or fate or destiny) has been written into the eternal plan of God since before creation, and what comes about in our lives and futures is predetermined by God to suit His own plan and eternal purpose. Of course this thought causes us some discomfort, because we don't like to think that we aren't in control of our own destiny. We think we're important and we have rights and expectations that God has to honor if He's really a loving and righteous God. We actually seem to think that He must live within our perceived boundaries of what is fair and just and right, rather than the other way around. If He says something or demands something that we feel is an infringement on our rights then we conclude that He must be wrong, or that the scriptures don't actually mean what they say, so we seek to redefine what it says to fit our concept of God.

But as I said in a previous lesson, and again in this lesson, it's not the vagueness or ambiguity of Romans 8 and 9 that cause us such a problem, on the contrary, it's the unmistakable clarity of them that causes our grief. Even the Reformed have some difficulties with the deeper aspects that are implicit in the teaching. Many feel that they have to defend God's honor, or make excuses for Him when they read these verses and ponder the implications. But the very thought that we can or need to defend God's honor rather than fall on our faces in subjection to His will is difficult for me to perceive. If God declares it, and I rightly understand and interpret what it is that He's saying, then it's true and righteous and holy, and that settles the matter for this preacher. God's righteousness, holiness, and sovereign authority to act in full accordance with His own will, are in no way dependent on my full understanding or my agreement. He is God, I am not.

He says that He predetermines the course of man's lives, and He sovereignly chooses whomever He desires for whatever use He has for them, I know this causes many people much grief, but for some reason it sounds perfectly reasonable to me. If God made everything and everyone by His own free choice out of nothing, by simply speaking it into being, then what are the reasonable limitations of His authority over those things? Examples, The flood of Noah that killed all but 8 humans on the whole earth, or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the drowning of Pharaoh and his whole army, or His order to Saul to kill every Amalekite, man, woman, child, and infant. Do we freely accept God's right to do these things and then turn around and call Him unrighteous if He predestines some to salvation and leaves others to destruction, according to His own free will to accomplish a master plan for a kingdom of eternal worshipers? I'm not so sure that Satan thought more highly of himself than most humans think of ourselves. Our sin is the same as his, we're just not as powerful. As I said in the beginning, I'm calling this whole chapter "The Sovereignty of God" so be prepared for more of this same theme as we work our way through this chapter. To God be the Glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Narrow Gate Baptist Church, Miami
Robert Andrews, Pastor
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