

## INTRODUCTION

Purpose is important. Every single person on the face of the earth wants to make a significant contribution to a significant undertaking. No exceptions! Every one of you wants to do this, because each of you was created by God to have a meaningful life.

A few times in my previous work, I was called upon to turn around organizations which were floundering or that were outright failing. In every single case, the workers didn't see how what they were doing contributed to the mission of the larger organization or they didn't see the mission of the larger organization as being important. I suspect that this is a common problem in failing organizations – but that reality, of laboring for no apparently good reason, just sucks the life out of people. In such an environment, instead of using their creativity and energy to produce something great – people are just going through the motions trying to do enough to draw a paycheck as the hours and days of their lives are simply discarded into the trash bin of history.

That's dreadful, and it is not the way that Christ is leading His Church. It isn't an accident that the very first question and answer of the Shorter Catechism is about your purpose in life: “Man's chief end – that is *man's chief purpose* – is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”

Paul has been teaching this very thing throughout Romans. Through the gospel, the LORD is glorifying Himself by manifesting His saving righteousness – a righteousness from God which leads to us being secure in His love and crying out “Abba! Father!” The LORD God is being glorified by what He does for us – and also by what He does through us – and, in Christ, we are secure in His love forever.

Consider just Romans chapter 8. Paul begins the chapter by declaring that “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” And he ends the chapter by talking about how “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded,” he writes, “that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Are you looking for meaning in life? In Christ, we are more than conquerors!

The chapter is framed by our good, our comfort, and the certain knowledge that all who belong to Christ Jesus will enjoy God forever. Yet, throughout the chapter, Paul has been showing us how this glorifies God in His sovereign grace – for He chose us in Christ before time began - and Almighty God has sovereignly ordained each link in our salvation from being predestined to being glorified so that it depends ultimately – not on our running – but on Him who called.

It is a beautiful chapter, and yet there is potentially a fly in the ointment. If the LORD sovereignly choosing us leads to God's glory and to our good – what about the Jews? Weren't the Jews in Paul's day still God's chosen people? Yet, only a tiny minority of them seem to have embraced Jesus Christ as their own Lord and Savior.

Do you feel the problem? Why should God be glorified, and the New Covenant people take such comfort and joy from being chosen by God in Christ, when most of the Old Covenant people who were chosen by God died without faith?

This is the critical question which Paul is addressing in Romans chapter 9.

Before we begin to explore Paul’s answer – let me say one more thing about purpose: Paul did not write Romans chapter 9 so that Calvinists could win theological arguments with Arminians nearly 2,000 years later. Do you get that? Paul did not write Romans chapter 9 so that Calvinists could win theological arguments with Arminians nearly 2,000 years later.

John Calvin lived 15 centuries after Paul, while Arminius was born even later. Calvin and Arminius had no impact on Paul whatsoever. Yes, it is true that it is impossible to square Arminius’ teaching with Romans chapter 9 – and many other passages in the Bible – but if you are reading Romans chapter 9 for the sake of showing that Arminius and his followers are wrong, you are missing the entire point of the chapter.

Paul wrote Romans 9 so that God’s glory would be magnified, and His people would be comforted through a display of the LORD’s sovereign grace in the salvation of His people.

## **BODY**

Paul begins with both the unique privileges of, and his own special love for, the Jewish people. Verses 1 through 5:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

It is impossible for us to hear these words without thinking of the evil of anti-Semitism, particularly the anti-Semitism which culminated in the Nazi Holocaust. Indeed, one of the shocking things to me is how anti-Semitism keeps rearing its ugly head – even in Europe – just two generations after six million Jews were brutally executed.

What these verses make clear is that Paul had not become anti-Semitic. Paul was not a Jew who had turned his back on his fellow countrymen. Having been rejected by the majority of Jews, and even being persecuted by them, for embracing Jesus as Messiah; Paul did not respond by rejecting his countrymen in kind. Instead, Paul protests that he loves the people of his own heritage with a profound and abiding love.

Paul seems to be echoing the Old Testament requirement that a legal claim be established by at least two witnesses. He stands in the dock and gives his own testimony, and then – secondly – he

calls his own conscience as a second witness. That might not seem very impressive at first, but let's pause and realize what Paul is actually doing.

Paul, after all, fully understood that the testimony of a conscience was only trustworthy to the extent that it was clear before God and that it had been rightly formed in accordance with God's word.

Think of Luther's famous confession at the Diet of Worms. On trial for his life, and asked to recant of his writings wherein he taught the Gospel, Luther famously responded:

If ... I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons, if I am not satisfied by the very text I have cited, and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God's word, I neither can nor will retract anything; for it cannot be either safe or honest for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me! I can do no other. Amen.

This is frequently, but accurately, simplified to:

My conscience is held captive by the word of God. Here I stand! God help me, I can do no other.

Modern secular westerners regularly assume that Luther was appealing to His conscience as the final authority in his decision making. But that is wrong. That is to stand Luther on his head. Yes, every Christian theologian is going to insist that individuals need to follow their consciences – the Roman Catholic Church teaches this very thing. But what Luther was appealing to, ultimately, was the word of God - which held his conscience captive. Luther took His stand upon God's revealed will in His inerrant and infallible word.

So it was with Paul. Look back at verse 1 with me. Paul writes:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.

The key phrases are “in Christ” and “in the Holy Spirit.” Ultimately, standing behind his own word, Paul is calling two unimpeachable witnesses – Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the love which he has for his fellow Jews.

How much does Paul love them? He says, in verse 2:

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

It is astonishing to think about loving people who persecute you that much ... until we remember that this is precisely what Jesus did. Jesus was in fact “accursed” and “cut off” on the cross – so that His enemies – that would be us – could be saved.

Paul, by God’s grace, was more and more reflecting Christ’s love for sinners in his own life. Of course, he can’t actually offer such a prayer with a clear conscience – for when Moses had done that very thing in ancient Israel – the LORD had corrected Moses by making clear that He would have mercy on whomever He chose to have mercy – and mere human beings – even Moses as God’s chosen covenant mediator – could not bargain with God into changing His plans. Furthermore, Paul had just concluded Romans chapter 8 by writing:

I am certain that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And Paul fully understood that this applied to his own life as well. Nevertheless, Paul’s profession of sacrificial love towards his fellow Jews is simply staggering.

But Paul doesn’t stop with his own love for his kinsmen according to the flesh, he declares that the privileges and blessings that the LORD had poured out on the Jewish people were truly astounding:

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

Paul doesn’t try to get around the problem of the LORD choosing the Jewish people by minimizing their unique position in the history of redemption. With the word, “sonship,” he is reminding us that the LORD said to Pharaoh: “Israel is My son, My firstborn son!” It is to, and through Israel, that the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David had been given. Most importantly, it is through the Jewish people that the Messiah Himself would come.

As to His human nature, Jesus was and is a Jew. There can simply be no place for anti-Semitism among Christians when we all profess to follow the Jewish Messiah.

By the way – did you notice the extraordinary way that Paul describes the Messiah. Paul declares that “the Christ” ... “is God over all, blessed forever.” This is one of the strongest declarations of the deity of Jesus in all of Paul’s writings. Naturally, those who reject the Lordship of Jesus try to twist Paul’s words to make them say something else. Calvin is spot on when he replies ...

To separate this clause – “God over all” – from the rest of the rest of the context for the purpose of depriving Christ of this clear witness to His divinity, is an audacious attempt to create darkness where there is full light.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans*, Vol. II, p. 470

You have to love Calvin!

But doesn't that leave us back where we started? If the LORD chose the Jewish people and gave them such extraordinary blessings, and such a critical role in the history of redemption, yet most of them were lost ... How can we take such great comfort from the knowledge that we have been chosen by God in Christ since before time began?

The answer is to realize that the Bible has always spoken of two distinct types of electing grace. The first is corporate while the second is individual. The corporate promises given to Israel as a nation involved both great privileges and great responsibilities for serving as a light to the nations; but these corporate blessings were not automatically salvific for everyone within the Old Testament Church.

Let us remember that the same is true of the New Covenant Church. It is an extraordinary blessing to have the LORD put His name upon you in baptism – when you were baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an extraordinary blessing to be part of the covenant community where the means of grace – in particularly the preaching and teaching of God's word – are concentrated. But while external blessings automatically imply great obligations, they do not automatically result in the salvation of each individual in the New Covenant Church. For salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone. Therefore, the LORD calls each of us to make our calling and election certain – by placing our trust firmly in Jesus Christ.

The LORD's promises to ancient Israel don't cast a shadow over God's faithfulness, for the LORD never promised to save every person who could trace his or her ancestry back to Abraham.

Isn't that what Paul is telling us? Look at verses 6 through 8 with me:

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

Now, from one perspective, the debate is entirely over. The Holy Spirit speaking through Paul has explained that there is both a corporate election of Israel and an election of individual Jews to salvation – so the matter is settled. But Paul wants the Romans, and us, to realize that this isn't just some clever argument he came up with – as though he is pulling a theological rabbit out of the hat. Paul wants us to see that this is precisely the way the LORD had always been dealing with His people, so Paul takes us back to the beginning.

I really like an illustration I heard from N.T Wright. I don't like everything Wright says about Romans, but I really like this illustration. You young people will have to use your imaginations,

a bit, as this illustration comes from back before everyone had GPS on their cell phones. Professor Wright says:

When you walk or drive through unfamiliar territory, you have to rely on your map. It is the bottom line. If you find yourself somewhere you didn't expect, you scratch your head, get out the map again and figure out where you went wrong. You mistook *that* turning for *this* one ... so you took the road that went *over there* instead of *over here* ... so no wonder you've ended up on the wrong side of the river. You'll have to go back and start over again from the place where you made the mistake. It is, of course, possible in theory that the map might be wrong. Map-makers are fallible human beings like the rest of us. But if that's the case, then you are really lost. There's nothing you can trust.

[What we see in this morning's] passage, and the next ones, right through to verse 29, is Paul going back to the beginning of the map and starting again. Jewish thinkers in his day often retold the story of Israel, beginning with Abraham or even with Adam, in order to explain the whole sequence of God's actions in their history up to the present day and even beyond. Paul is doing something similar. Here he tells, ..., the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and of Ishmael and Esau as well – in order to explain what the map (God's word of promise) had in mind all along ...<sup>2</sup>

Of course, since the Scriptures are God's word, there is absolutely no possibility at all that there is anything wrong with the map.

So Paul is going to walk us along redemptive history, starting with Abraham, by drawing our attention to three key turns on God's map. First, there is the birth of Isaac.

Verse 9:

For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.”

Every Jew would have instantly grasped Paul's point. Isaac was chosen while Ishmael was passed over. In fact, Ishmael would be driven out from the covenant community. Merely being a physical descendent of Abraham was not enough. One also had to be the child of promise.

But many Jews might have countered: This choice of Isaac makes complete sense because Isaac was the child of Sarah while Ishmael was the child of Hagar – an Egyptian slave girl. So Paul presses on to his second illustration. Verses 10 through 13:

And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Romans for Everyone*, Vol. II, pp. 6-7.

works but because of him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

It is difficult to see how Paul could have made the point any more forcefully. Jacob and Esau were not merely brothers with the same father and mother – they were twins. And Esau would be the firstborn – which in many cultures should have given him the preeminence. Yet, before either of them was even born – before either of them had ever done anything right or wrong – the LORD set his electing love about Jacob. “As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”

For many people, this raises an obvious problem: If the LORD is going to choose people without any regard to their own moral behavior isn’t God being arbitrary? Or as many Americans might put it: “That’s not fair!”

Paul responds, in part, by saying: Don’t you realize that the LORD Himself has already answered this objection? I call as my third witness, the encounter between the LORD and Moses after the disaster of the burning bush. Look at verses 14 through 16 with me:

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 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 depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy!” Some people object to what Paul is clearly saying because they want to take credit for their own salvation; while others object because they want to clear God of the charge of being arbitrary – or even unjust in condemning people even before they are born. But what both groups of people are missing is that the key word in this entire section is the word “Mercy.” What is mercy? Mercy is not giving people the negative consequences, the punishment, that they deserve. Who deserves mercy? Beloved, nobody deserves mercy. That is the whole point. God is giving some people mercy while is giving others justice. He isn’t giving injustice to anyone.

But, we might ask, “Why doesn’t God show mercy to everyone?” We need to be really careful here – for we are treading on dangerous ground. None of us should imagine that we would be more merciful and gracious than the LORD has been in redeeming a people for Himself. Those of you who are parents, would shutter at the idea of offering up one of your beloved children to save – not just someone else – but someone else who repeatedly sins against you – but that is precisely what the Living God has done. Let us never forget that God’s grace is more amazing than any of us has fully fathomed. Secondly, we shouldn’t pretend that we fully understand the mind of God. “The things that have been revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we might do all the deeds of God’s law” but there are also many other things which the LORD has not yet chosen to reveal to us. Where Scripture is silent, we ought to put a hand over our mouths.

But Paul does give us a pointer – not an exhaustive answer, but a pointer in how we are to wrestle with the issue of those whom the LORD passes over. Verses 17 and 18:

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

Why did the LORD raise up Pharaoh, rather than converting Pharaoh to worship him through the testimony of Moses? The LORD says that He did this for His own glory – that the LORD’s glory would be manifested in crushing the world’s lone Super Power – Egypt - as He miraculously delivered His people. And please remember: That is precisely what happened: Forty years later, when Israel was about to enter the Promised Land, Rahab commented on how terrified all the people of the land were in light of what God had done to Pharaoh. And do you remember, that much later, while Eli was serving as High Priest, that the Philistine’s said the same thing? When the Ark of the Covenant entered the camp of Israel, ...

... the Philistines were afraid, for they said, “A god has come into the camp.” And they said, “Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness.

While the Philistines weren’t confessing, “Here O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One.” They were inadvertently giving the true God glory for His great might in overthrowing Pharaoh and casting the Egyptian army into the sea.

We should remember, that while Almighty God is working everything that ever happens together for the good of His people – that He has designed and created the universe for His own glory. After all, God is not an idolater. ... The LORD’s chief end is also to glorify God and to enjoy Himself forever.

## CONCLUSION

Paul has a great deal more to say on this subject. LORD willing, we will look at some of what he has to say, together, next week.

But for now, it should be enough for us to see that “God’s word hasn’t failed.” The LORD had chosen Israel as a nation for a special role in the history of redemption – and it is through Israel that the LORD brought forth Jesus Christ our Lord.

Yet, being used by the LORD for His purposes is not the same thing as belonging to Him. It is therefore not enough for us to rest in the precious and very great privileges we enjoy as members of Christ’s visible Church. We should never rest in merely being children of the flesh when the LORD is calling us to become and to be “children of the promise.” Each of us, therefore, is obligated to make our own calling and election sure.

And because God’s word never fails, this is so simple that everyone here this morning can do so before we leave. For God promises in His word that “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”

"He who promised is faithful. He will surely do it." *Amen*