

ROMANS 9

God Will Judge Everyone With Perfect Fairness

How often in life have you said, “That’s not fair!” You’ve probably heard your kids say it many times, often possibly to you, as they protest being asked to do some chore or do something they think their friends are allowed to do. Remember when you as a child or your children always counted out every piece of candy to make sure all shares were equal? That extreme concern for fairness doesn’t just live with us and our children. We find it in the Jewish people of Paul’s day as well.

So Paul takes three chapters here in the middle of the book of Romans to not only declare God’s fairness, but to clarify to His beloved Jewish nation the ways that God has always been ultimately fair with them. Paul further assures them God will always be fair to them. But you and I could shudder at the thought of God’s fairness; we much more want to hear about His mercy and grace. Paul will also speak of that in these chapters, as we will see today and in the coming weeks.

As we open our study of chapter nine, let’s just briefly review the author’s background. Paul had been a zealous Jew, one who practiced the dictates of the Law of God with such enthusiasm that he took great delight in persecuting these new followers of Jesus Christ. Paul, before his conversion, believed in his heart that Christians were idolaters and if allowed to go unchecked, would lead many Jews astray, causing them to believe in something that was not true. But on his way to the city of Damascus where he had been authorized to arrest and even murder these troublemakers, Jesus appeared to Paul in a blinding light and immediately converted him to faith in Christianity. After a period of training at the feet of Jesus Himself, Paul became the main spokesman for the rapidly spreading Christian faith.

Even after his conversion Paul maintained his close ties to the Jewish community whom he loved very much. He wanted more than anything for them to see the truth in the message of Jesus and that Jesus was the Messiah that had been so long promised to the Jewish people. The book of Romans is a letter Paul wrote to the Jews living in Rome, hoping to give them a better understanding of the truth of the message of Christ. Hopefully this background will help you better understand the initial verses of Romans 9.

It seems strange that Paul would interrupt his discussion here of salvation and devote a long section of three chapters, chapters nine through eleven, to the nation of Israel. Why didn’t he move from the doctrinal teaching of Romans 8 to the practical duties given in Romans 12–15? A careful study of Romans 9–11 reveals that this section is not an interruption at all; **it is a necessary part of Paul’s argument for justification by faith.**

To begin with, Paul was considered a traitor by the Jewish people. He ministered to Gentiles and he taught that no one could be saved by keeping the Law of Moses because no one was capable of keeping every single aspect of the Law through their own will

power. He had preached in many Jewish synagogues and caused trouble, and no doubt many of the Jewish Christians in Rome, who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, had heard of Paul's questionable reputation. In these chapters, Paul shows his love for the Jews, the people of Israel, and his desire for their welfare.

You'll remember that Paul taught in Romans 8 that those who believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and died for their sins are secure in their salvation and that God's promise of such security would never be taken away as we read in Romans 8:1-8.

We're going to briefly review these verses in Romans 8:1-8 because they are so important to remember as we get into Romans 9. Please feel free to stop and ask questions about anything that doesn't appear clear to you. Romans 8:1-8

*1 Therefore there is now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

Anyone who believes that Jesus Christ died for their sins will never be condemned by God because through their faith and God's mercy, God has forgiven their sin: past, present, and future, and will always see them as pure and as sinless as Christ. They are guaranteed a place in Heaven and that promise will never be withdrawn, it is cast in stone.

2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

The moment a person believes in the work of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit of God comes to live inside of them. The Holy Spirit is the force that leads a person to accept Christ, gives them a new life, and therefore frees them from the necessity of keeping all of God's law on their own.

*3 **For what the Law could not do**, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh,*

The Law that God gave to Moses, basically the Ten Commandments, did not have the capability to keep people from sinning. Sin is a natural characteristic of all people who are in the flesh, that is who have not accepted Jesus as their Savior. "Flesh" designates people who are still in their sin nature as unbelievers, who desire only the material pleasures of this world. They think life is all about them. The Spirit, or the **Holy Spirit**, is the force that can help us overcome our corrupt sinful nature. The Spirit is God at work in us and through us. The Spirit produces life in us, a life of abundance as compared to a life of despair. The Spirit provides energy and power for us to live the Christian life, to live according to the will of God, and become more like Christ with each passing day.

*4 so that the requirement of the **Law might be fulfilled in us**, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

Failure to perfectly keep the law brings judgment and condemnation according to Deut.27:26. But no one can keep all the commands of the law under their own strength. **But because of our faith in Jesus and the subsequent forgiveness of all our sins, God sees us as sinless and thus as keeping His entire Law.** Is God gracious or what?

5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

If a person is not a believer in Christ they are in the flesh, and such people think only of the things this material world can provide them. But those who have believed in Christ possess the Holy Spirit who will lead them and give them the strength to shape their behavior to conform to the will of God.

6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,

7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so,

8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

If you reject the message of Jesus Christ, you will not find true joy in this life and you will most certainly never see Heaven.

Now Paul knows that someone among the Jews is going to ask, “*Well, then, what about the Jews? They were chosen by God, and yet now you tell us they are set aside and God is building His church with people who are not Jews, and if the Jews want to be saved they too have to accept this Jesus. Did God therefore lie to Israel?*” So we see here that among the Jews hearing Paul’s message, the very character of God was at stake. **If God was not faithful to the Jews, how can people be certain that He will be faithful to the Church?**

We will find, as we go through Romans 9, that Paul has a tremendous love for his people, the Jews. We will also find that he is trying to help them understand how God is dealing with the total nation of Israel, not just with individual Jews. When we come to some of the hard to grasp sections, we must keep this in mind: this chapter talks more about the nation’s relationship to God than the individual’s relationship. Individual relationships with God will be discussed more when we get to chapter 10.

The emphasis in Romans 9 is on Israel’s past election, in Romans 10 on Israel’s present rejection, and in Romans 11 on Israel’s future restoration.

In Romans 9, Paul defends the character of God by showing that Israel’s past history actually served to glorify the qualities of God.

He specifically names four qualities of God: **His faithfulness** in Romans 9:1–13, His **righteousness** in Romans 9:14–18, **justice** in Romans 9:19–29, and **grace** in Romans 9:30–33. You will note that these divisions correspond with Paul’s three questions: “*Is God unfair?*” in Romans 9:14, “*Why does God blame people for not listening? Haven’t they simply done what he made them do?*” in Romans 9:19, and “*What shall we say then about all these things?*” in Romans 9:30.

Let’s begin by looking at God’s Faithfulness in Rom. 9:1–13, where Paul writes:

1 In the presence of Christ, I speak with utter truthfulness—I do not lie—and my conscience and the Holy Spirit confirm that what I am saying is true.

2 My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief

3 for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them.

4 They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God’s special children. God revealed his glory to them. He made covenants with them and gave his law to them. They have the privilege of worshipping him and receiving his wonderful promises.

*5 Their ancestors were great people of God, and **Christ himself was a Jew** as far as his human nature is concerned.*

*And **Jesus is God**, who rules over everything and is worthy of eternal praise! Amen.*

*6 Well then, **has God failed to fulfill his promise to the Jews?** No, for not everyone born into a Jewish family is truly a Jew!*

*7 Just the fact that they are descendants of Abraham doesn’t make them truly Abraham’s children. For the Scriptures say, “**Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted,**” though Abraham had other children, too.*

*8 This means that **Abraham’s physical descendants are not necessarily children of God. It is the children of the promise who are considered to be Abraham’s children.***

9 For God had promised, “Next year I will return, and Sarah will have a son.”

*10 This son was our ancestor **Isaac**. When he grew up, he married Rebekah, who gave birth to twins.*

*11 But before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad, she received a message from God. (This message proves that **God chooses according to his own plan,***

*12 not according to our good or bad works.) She was told, “**The descendants of your older son will serve the descendants of your younger son.**”*

13 In the words of the Scriptures, “I loved Jacob, but I rejected Esau.”

It is quite a transition to see how Paul moved from the joy of Romans 8 into the sorrow and burden of Romans 9. When he looked at Christ, Paul rejoiced; but when he looked at the lost people of Israel, he wept. Like Moses (Exodus 32:30–35), **Paul was willing to be cursed and separated from Christ if it would mean the salvation of the people of Israel whom he loved so much**. What a man this Paul was! He was willing to substitute himself and go to Hell if it would mean that the lost people of Israel would accept Christ and thus receive salvation and eternal life in Heaven.

Paul focuses here on God's election of Israel to be God's people. The first thing Paul deals with in Romans 9:4,5 is the blessing that is Israel's because they were selected by God. Israel was adopted by God as His own people as we see in Exodus 4:22

*22 Then you will tell him, 'This is what the Lord says: **Israel is my firstborn son.***

You see it was God's intention to select a single nation, teach them His ways and help them to understand how they could live a joyous, peaceful life here on earth, and then be assured of salvation and eternity with God in Heaven. Right from the beginning it was God's plan that the nation he selected first, Israel, would take this message to the rest of the world. We'll see as we go along in the rest of our study of Romans that Israel never did that. They used their special privilege instead to make themselves a unique nation and did not want the rest of the world to share in their special privileged status. So in effect their attitude was, "*We want it all and we don't want anyone else to share in it.*" This was not God's original intention, and He was very disappointed and angry with the people of Israel who felt this way.

God gave Israel His covenants (promises), the first to Abraham, and then additional covenants to Moses and to David. He also gave them His Law to govern their political, social, and religious life, and to guarantee His blessing if they obeyed. He gave them "*the service of God,*" referring to the ministry in the tabernacle and the temple. He gave them the promises and the patriarchs or "*the fathers*" (in many Bible translations) of Romans 9:5. The purpose of all of this blessing was that Jesus Christ, through Israel, might come into the world. (Note that Romans 9:5 affirms that Jesus Christ is God). All of these blessings were given freely to Israel and to no other nation.

But in spite of these blessings, Israel failed. When the Messiah appeared, Israel rejected Him and crucified Him. No one knew this better than Paul, because in his early days he had persecuted the church of Christ. **Does Israel's failure mean that God's promises are no longer believable?** The answer is, No! God is faithful no matter what people of this world may do with His Word. In Romans 9:6-8, Paul explains that **God didn't guarantee salvation to the Jews** just because He chose them to be His people:

*6 Well then, has God failed to fulfill his promise to the Jews? No, **for not everyone born into a Jewish family is truly a Jew!***

7 Just the fact that they are descendants of Abraham doesn't make them truly Abraham's children. For the Scriptures say, "Isaac is the son

through whom your descendants will be counted,” though Abraham had other children, too.

8 This means that Abraham’s physical descendants are not necessarily children of God. It is the children of the promise who are considered to be Abraham’s children.

In many churches today it is believed that if people who claim to be followers of Jesus have their children baptized or confirmed, those children will automatically have salvation. Many of those same people believe that if they belong to a certain church and attend almost every week, and go through all the rituals dictated by the church, that will provide them salvation and eternal life. They are badly mistaken because there is not a shred of truth in any of these claims by the church.

It is only those who make a personal decision to believe in the work of Jesus Christ who are saved.

As we saw in Romans 2:25–29, there is a difference between those that are the physical ancestors of Abraham and those who are the spiritual children of Abraham. Abraham actually had two sons, Ishmael, an illegitimate son of Hagar who was his wife’s maidservant, and Isaac, who was born to Abraham’s wife, Sarah. Since Ishmael was the firstborn, according to Jewish custom, he should have been chosen, but it was Isaac that God chose. When Isaac and his wife, Rebecca, had twin sons, Esau and Jacob, as the firstborn, Esau should have been chosen, but it was Jacob that God chose. And Esau and Jacob had the same father and mother, unlike Ishmael and Isaac who had the same father but different mothers.

Isaac and Ishmael each became the fathers of great nations. Isaac is the father of the Jewish peoples and Ishmael is the father of the Arab peoples. We can see today the different routes and different beliefs these two peoples have taken. The Israelites still worship, **though incompletely**, the God of Abraham. Many Jewish people have received Christ as Savior and consider themselves “*completed Jews*.” By that they mean they are descendants of Abraham who have embraced the Messiah and become followers of Jesus. But the descendants of Ishmael have replaced Jehovah God with Allah in their thinking, and they make Mohammed their favored prophet. As such Muslims have rejected Christ and chosen to follow a different way. So you can understand why Paul in verses 7 and 8 says, “*Abraham’s physical descendants are not necessarily children of God.*”

God did not base His election on who was a physical descendant. Therefore, if the greatest majority of the people of the nation of Israel, all of Abraham’s physical descendants, rejected God’s Word, this does not nullify God’s promise to the people of Israel. It was only those people in the nation of Israel who chose to reject God’s requirements and therefore reject God who were excluded from salvation, and that’s what Romans 9:6-10 is all about, Those who believed and trusted in God’s promises would

receive salvation.

What we're basically looking at here is that there were always two Israels. There was the Israel who believed in God's promises and followed His instructions and there was the Israel who took their selected position as people of God and used it for their own benefit. Those who trusted and believed in God and followed His will were the real people of Israel, those who are chosen and blessed. It is the same way today. Everyone who believes in God and the work of Jesus Christ will receive salvation. Those that don't will not. All believers in Christ are in effect the true Israel of God who are inheritors of all of the promises God has made from the very beginning of the Bible.

God chose Jacob over Esau before either of them were born. The two boys had done neither good nor evil before they were born, so God's choice was not based on their character or conduct. Romans 9:13:

13 Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Again we see that two different nations are involved here. Esau chose to marry Canaanite and Ishmaelite women. So you see he joined himself to the descendants of Ishmael. Esau also founded the country of Edom, which was often a thorn in the side of Israel. Kings Saul and David both fought against the Edomites. Eventually Edom was taken over by Babylon and then it became a province of the Persian Empire called Idumea. Antipater, the father of Herod the Great, came from Idumea. At this Christmas season we are all reminded of Herod the Great for he was the one who had all the boy babies in Bethlehem killed in an attempt to get rid of the Christ Child. So you can see that Esau and his descendants went far away from the God of Israel. God with His divine foreknowledge could look down through the centuries and know the choices Esau and his descendants would make. Hopefully, that gives you some additional understanding of what is meant in these difficult verses. Also you see that God is talking more about nations than about individuals in this passage.

Paul went back into sacred history and showed that, first of all, God's promises *never* included *all* physical descendants of Abraham. God's promises were for those who trusted and had faith in Him. Ishmael, though a child of Abraham, was not included in the covenant promises; only Isaac was (Genesis 21:12). Later Jacob and Esau were born as twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. But God's purpose included one, and excluded the other. Before the boys were even born (and thus before they could have done either good or bad, so that their actions were no basis for God's choice), God announced that one was chosen and the other rejected as a participant in the covenant line.

Note here that "*hated*," which is actually used in many translations of Romans 9:13, is used in a way that the language of our modern world could not interpret properly. I believe John Stott has found the best interpretation for this verse that fits the character of the God of the Bible the best. The word "*hate*" in this verse is actually a Hebrew idiom, that is the grammatical form peculiar to a certain language. God didn't **hate** Esau as we would define the word, but rather he **selected** Jacob over Esau for this particular job.

Next week we'll pick up on this theme and show how we believe Jesus Himself meant this word to be interpreted.