

PROLOGUE TO PRISON

Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

by Richard C. Halverson

- 1954 -

Cowman Publishing Company, Inc. California

Chapter 17 -

JUSTICE AND MERCY

Romans 9:14-24

If one sought to be popular in the pulpit, to preach simply what folks like to hear, he certainly would skip over the 9th chapter of Romans, for not only is this a difficult chapter; it contains a very unpopular truth, a truth which we find ourselves intuitively resisting. What Paul is discussing in this chapter is the very knotty problem of the sovereignty of Almighty GOD; GOD reigns, He is the final authority and the final arbiter. Whatever He does is right; nothing happens outside of His control, however infinitesimal or microscopic! He is the ruler of the cosmos! He ordains whatever comes to pass; nothing takes Him by surprise. The question then is raised, if GOD is sovereign, is man free? Paul does not give us an explicit answer to that question but he does answer it implicitly, and we get more of an answer in the 10th and 11th chapters.

It is my conviction that this teaching is very practical. It is possible to be purely academic about it, to keep aloof from personal experience, but it was not so designed. Paul was writing to Christians for their reassurance, their edification, their encouragement; and especially in a day such as ours there ought to be strong encouragement, reassurance and confidence in such a passage as this. The important thing is, what kind of a GOD do you believe in? Is He a little GOD or is He the GOD of the Old and New Testaments? In the words of J. B. Phillips, "*Is your GOD too small*" for the times in which we live, or do you have faith in the GOD of the Book?

If we really believe in the GOD of the Book, fear is unbecoming, hysteria is unbecoming, panic is unbecoming; the need for Christians of poise and promise is going to increase, not diminish, in the days ahead. The importance of being oriented in the scriptural view of GOD has never been greater; therefore, GOD grant that His sovereignty shall not simply be an academic matter with us, but one of experience; that our faith, our trust, our confidence shall be rooted and grounded in the nature and the integrity of GOD.

Two issues are involved in Romans 9: first, Paul's deep concern for his own people, Israel; and secondly, his deeper concern to uphold the fidelity of Almighty GOD. He begins this chapter in the first three verses by expressing his concern for Israel. **"I say the truth in Christ,"** says he, **"I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh."** He does not resolve this

problem in the 9th chapter; we must wait until the 10th and 11th, but this mention is made to indicate the fact that these three chapters are not the writing of an anti-Semitic but the writing of a Jew who was proud of his Jewish legacy and heritage; one who was so burdened for his own people that he could wish himself literally condemned if that would lead to their salvation. It reminds us of Moses, who in the midst of the murmuring of Israel while agonizing in prayer said, "Drop my name out of the Book of Life, if it be possible to save this people!"

We are living in a day in which it is very easy to be misunderstood when one speaks with New Testament conviction.

Recently I had a rather lengthy telephone conversation with a Jewish lady who listens regularly to a devotional broadcast which I make. Though quite complimentary, she entertained deep concern about certain basic Christian truths because, being Jewish, she feared the possibility that these truths might be misconstrued and used to feed anti-Semitism. Two things ought to be said: first, we cannot stop preaching the truth in order to avoid this, which I told her. The heart of our message is the Gospel, which is that JESUS CHRIST was crucified for our sins; and if one cannot preach the Gospel, there is no point in preaching; this is the message and it must be preached even if it is offensive. Furthermore, this is not an anti-Semitic doctrine, nor does it imply that the Jews were "CHRIST-killers," a view held by ignorant people, however intelligent they may seem to be. It was the sin of man, Jew and Gentile, that put the Son of GOD upon the cross of Calvary, and Gentile and Jew alike must assume responsibility for the death of CHRIST.

What Paul is doing here is simply declaring certain facts about GOD, about Israel, and about the Gentile; and he is speaking out of a heart deeply compassionate toward Israel, willing to be sacrificed for her sake if necessary. He mentions Israel's advantages, verses 4 and 5. **"Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory,** (When Israel was encamped, the tabernacle was at the center of the community; and rising out from the Holy of Holies over the Ark of the Covenant was the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of flame by night, indicating GOD's presence and glory.) **and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God,** (The Book of Leviticus deals with the service of GOD, Israel's worship.) **and the promises; Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen."** Let us never forget this, that the One Whom we worship was born of a Jew!

Yet with all of these advantages, Israel in large measure, rejected her own MESSIAH, not entirely, however, as we shall see, and therefore every advantage compounded her judgment. *This is one of the terrible implications in preaching, to realize that if you illuminate truth the one who hears, if he does not accept the truth and obey it, is judged by the very truth which is proclaimed.* Judgment increases with every hearing of the Gospel if it is rejected, the truth was meant to be obeyed, not simply intellectually apprehended.

The question then arises, if Israel with all of these advantages rejected GOD and is therefore outside the pale of His love, how can we take seriously what we have just read in the 8th chapter of Romans for did not Paul say, **"All things work together for good to them that love GOD, to them who are the called according to His purpose?"** Was not Israel loved of GOD? Was not Israel called according to His purpose? He asks the question, **"If God be for us, who can be**

against us?" Was not GOD for Israel - who then can be against her? The whole principle, you see, of the faithfulness and fidelity of GOD is involved in this question of the Jew, GOD's chosen people, to whom belonged all of these advantages through history. What about them if they are now cut off? And so we ask: Does Jewish rejection of the MESSIAH constitute the failure of GOD? The answer is no; this fulfills the very purpose of GOD; this is the unfolding of GOD's will in history.

In the light of Paul's glorious declaration at the end of chapter 8, how is it that the chosen of GOD have now been rejected by GOD? He answers it this way, "**For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel** (he will amplify this later) **Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children.**" He then quotes from the Old Testament, "**In Isaac shall thy seed be called.**" Isaac was a miracle. Abraham was past a hundred and Sarah, who had never been able to bear a child, was ninety. GOD said, "**Sarah thy wife shall have a son.**" GOD meant what He said, and Isaac was the son of the promise. Now in Isaac is true Israel called, they are the children of the promise, and it is these children of the promise who are reckoned as true Israel, who are reckoned as the descendants of Abraham. We will see at the end of the chapter that all who have faith are the descendants of the true Israel.

Paul has already told us this in the 4th chapter; this is not a new doctrine. You recall that Abraham and Sarah in their impatience tried to work out this promise in their own way: Sarah gave Abraham her handmaiden Hagar as a wife, and of that union was born Ishmael. Who was Ishmael? The father of the Arab, and of the Arab came Islam.

This is the picture. "**In Isaac shall thy seed be called,**" and having illustrated it with Sarah, he illustrates it with Rebecca, a stronger illustration because he says beginning at verse 10, "**And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; (For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.**" Here it is though very difficult for us to accept; when they were still in the womb of their mother, their destiny was foreordained of GOD! Before we were born, our destiny (not salvation) was ordered of the Lord; indeed we are told in the Word of GOD, called or elect "**before the foundation of the world.**" And we see that election in the Old Testament was of the Hebrews over all the Gentiles, and in the New Testament, it is the Lord's Church.

But this raises a serious problem. If before Jacob and Esau were born GOD already loved one and hated the other before one had the opportunity to earn His disfavor and the other had an opportunity to earn His favor, how then could GOD blame Esau? Is GOD unjust? Is He unfair? And Paul uses the strongest negative in the Bible in answering, "**GOD forbid.**" I should like to say here that this ought to be the first answer. Can GOD make a mistake? However unjust what GOD does may seem to us, is it really unjust? Oh, how desperately we need to understand today that we ought to allow nothing to impugn the integrity of Almighty GOD. GOD is GOD! Of course, whatever GOD does is just for He is a just GOD!

That is, nothing that Esau could do would force GOD to allow Him to be the chosen race - this was for Isaac and his seed alone. In this sense, GOD's decision was "irresistible."

There are those who, unwilling somehow to rest upon the integrity of GOD, try to explore and explain these things; but they succeed only in explaining them away, thereby raising greater difficulties theologically and intellectually. The fact is that men of science accept many things which they cannot explain; this is not peculiar to Christian faith; this is not wishful thinking; this is not contrary to reason nor to intellect. **"Let God be true, but every man a liar."**

Paul said in an earlier chapter, GOD is not unjust. He supports his argument from the Old Testament: did not GOD say to Moses, **"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion?"** Implied here, you see, is the fact that man has no claim on GOD but His mercy. GOD would not be unjust to reject all men. On that occasion when JESUS CHRIST lifted the veil between the now and the hereafter, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, **"the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me!"** (Luke 16:22-24) He was in torment, but he did not ask for justice; he asked for mercy. Never in history or beyond history will any man, whatever his destiny, question the justice of GOD; therefore Paul says, verse 16, **"So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy."**

Pharaoh also is an example of this. GOD said, for this purpose He raised up Pharaoh, in order that He might demonstrate His justice, His mercy, and His glory. And so did GOD raise up Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin; and so has GOD raised up Khrushchev. GOD is free to have mercy on whom He will, and He hardeneth whom He will!

Paul gives two answers, first, **"Who art thou that repliest against (questions) GOD?"** Now that may seem to be begging the question, but ponder its logic. Who am I to question GOD? This is one of our problems; in our human sophistication we dare even to question GOD! Then with irresistible logic, he asks, **"Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why has thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?"**

What kind of a GOD do you believe in anyway? Just a big Santa Claus, or do you believe in a just GOD who has everything in control, whose actions are never questionable?

There is another answer intimated here beginning at verse 22, **"What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction?"** Just a glimpse into the patience of GOD with men that He could have rejected long before; as though GOD is waiting, hoping that they will see the light, giving them every opportunity to turn their hearts to repentance, enduring their irreligion, their pride, and their sin.

Then he quotes from Hosea and reminds Israel what GOD had promised in Old Testament times, that He was going to raise up a people that were **"not My people"** and a nation that was **"not beloved"** in order that He might show His glory in them. From Isaiah he suggests a theme he is going to cover later, the remnant in Israel; even Isaiah understood that not all of Israel would be saved, but those who were descended from Isaac, that is, **"a remnant."**

Then he comes to the final answer beginning at the 30th verse; yes, GOD is sovereign but Israel

is responsible, for she stumbled over the stone, the rock, JESUS CHRIST!

Notice his language, **"What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness."** Why? **"Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law."** They stumbled over the stumbling stone, **"Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed."** Why did Israel fall? Because she pursued righteousness by works, not because she was indifferent to righteousness; she was interested in righteousness on her own conditions.

Recall what the serpent said to Eve in the Garden? He did not say, disobey GOD, eat this fruit and go to hell. He said, **"in the day ye eat thereof... ye shall be as gods!"** What the serpent insinuated to Eve was this, "Look, you be godlike on my conditions instead of GOD's conditions." ***This is original sin, and it is the root of all religion in history; be righteous on your own conditions; be righteous your own way; follow your own law, your own ethics, your own morals. This is the reason why Israel did not obtain righteousness because she sought it by works rather than by faith. While pursuing righteousness through your own good works; you stumble over the chief stumbling stone, JESUS CHRIST.***

This is the great hindrance, greater than any other; this is the greatest sin, rejecting the love of GOD in CHRIST, the righteousness, which is a gift of GOD through faith! JESUS CHRIST is the issue. What does He mean to you? Are you trusting yourself or Him?

~ end of chapter 17 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
