

Two weeks ago we began looking at the ninth chapter of Romans, a chapter that encloses within it several verses that are a little tricky to interpret to say the least. As a result the chapter has itself been the basis for several controversial doctrines over the years. In order to deal with the content quite thoroughly I decided to break the chapter down into two sermons. A fortnight ago I dealt with matters relating to the nation of Israel and in particular what Paul meant when he said that 'not all Israel are Israel'. This morning I am going to spend time looking at what the Bible says about other issues that arise out of this chapter namely that of man's freewill and God's sovereignty. I emphasise the words 'what the Bible says' because the more difficult the issues we're studying the less we need to confuse things with our own opinions and the more we need to rely upon the Bible to speak for itself and the more we need the good guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 17 v 11 says this:

'Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.'

If what you hear preached isn't in line with the main body of scripture then it's just not true. When the Bereans heard Paul preach they went to see if the rest of scripture supported what he had said. Rather than being berated for not blindly accepting the apostle's teaching they were applauded for it even to getting an honorary mention in the scriptures.

In 2 Timothy 2 v 15 Paul says this:

'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.'

If we are told to correctly handle the word of truth it stands to reason that we must be able to incorrectly handle it as well.

The New King James version uses the phrase 'rightly dividing the word of truth'

Paul is reminding us that the word of God needs to be handled correctly – with wisdom. In actual fact without wisdom it can be very dangerous. For example Leviticus 20 v 10 says:

'If a man commits adultery with another man's wife --with the wife of his neighbour--both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death.'

Without an understanding of how Christ has fulfilled the old law and brought in a better covenant built upon grace and forgiveness we may have to take a harder line with a husband or wife that has strayed. Picture the scene on a Sunday morning. Please come to the front if you've strayed a little in your marriage the elders of the church would like to minister to you. Could we also have the rocks brought to the front please? On the upside though, we'd have a very impressive record regarding reoffending rates wouldn't we? In explaining himself to headquarters Robin would probably say "It may seem harsh but they won't do it again! On the down side we have fewer married couples in the church these days. Some have ceased coming whilst others have, well, just ceased."

Thankfully the law has made way for God's grace so John and Jerry, as much as your enthusiasm should be commended, would you put the rocks down now please.

Hebrews 4 v 12 likens the word of God to a double-edged sword. Now imagine giving such a weapon to a complete novice. You'd probably advise them with the words "Now, you need to be very careful with this. Don't go wielding it about without thinking." The same advice would be just as useful when giving someone a Bible for the first time. Chapters and verses need to be understood in context, keeping their harmony with the rest of the Bible. What some readers of Romans 9 have done is to form doctrines from a reading of it that do not line up with the rest of scripture. If what we read isn't in agreement with the rest of scripture then we have either misunderstood what we are reading or we have taken the verses out of context.

Let us consider the following verses in Romans 9:

¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls – she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' ¹³ Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'

¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'

¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. ¹⁷ For Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' ¹⁸ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

¹⁹ One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?' ²⁰ But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? 'Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?"' ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?

²² What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? ²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory..'

Now some have taken these verses to mean that God sovereignly determines who will be saved and who will be lost and that it is His will, not freewill that is the decisive element in salvation. That each person's eternal destiny is entirely predestined by God. This is a wrong interpretation of these verses and we can see this when holding these verses up to the light of the rest of God's Word.

First of all let us tackle the question of whether people have the freedom to reach out for salvation? The Bible has lots to say on this issue!

In Deuteronomy 30 vs 11-20 Moses declares this to the nation of Israel:

¹¹ Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.

I have the feeling here that Moses might have been coming to the end of his tether with the nation of Israel at this point! He's certainly reached the point of highlighting what he is going to say next because he wants the nation to understand it. So he carries on.

¹² It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it?' ¹³ Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, 'Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it?' ¹⁴ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it.

In essence he is saying that salvation is not out of reach to any of them. It's in their hands – well, Moses says it's within their mouth and heart but you know what I'm saying. He continues.

¹⁵ See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶ For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹ This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him.

Kind of reads as if they do have a choice in the matter doesn't it? If people's salvation was already divinely decided in some way then Moses extensive pleading and exhorting of the nation would have been utterly in vain, quite redundant, ineffective and pointless. The reason Moses urges them to make the right choice is because they have a choice to make. Pure and simple.

But let's support it with another Old Testament scripture.

In Joshua 24 v 15 we hear Joshua's rallying cry to the nation:

'...choose for yourselves this day who you will serve....as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'

Let's step into the New Testament now. In 2 Corinthians 5 v 20 Paul himself makes this plea to the Corinthians:

'We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.'

You would only implore someone to be reconciled if you know they can be reconciled.

In the New Testament, in Matthew 11 v 28 we hear Jesus saying these words to the Galileans:

‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.’

‘All’ includes everybody doesn’t it? No exclusions or barriers except each person’s freedom to decline it.

In Acts 16 v 31 Paul and Silas declare to the jailor:

‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.’

In Acts 17 v 30 Paul preaches the following message in Athens:

‘[God] commands all people everywhere to repent.’

Not only do we all have the freedom to reach out for salvation God commands us to receive it.

In Revelation 22 v 17 John sees a vision of Jesus who tells him the following:

‘The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.’

Matthew 7 vs 7, 8 recounts the words of Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount:

‘Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.’

And not forgetting the most quoted of all scriptures, John 3 v 16 which also testifies that salvation is offered and made available to all:

John 3 v 16

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’

Salvation is available to all of course because Jesus died for everyone’s sin.

1 Timothy 2 vs 1-6:

‘I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – ² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³ This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, ⁴ who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all people.’

2 Peter 3 v 9

‘The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.’

The Bible is repleat with such verses giving clear, undeniable evidence that God desires that all would come to salvation, that Jesus died for everyone's sin and that God wills that none perish. We do know that not all do receive God's offer of salvation but this does not detract from the fact that the offer of salvation is there for all. Rather than denying freewill God extends it. Salvation must be personally received – God does not force it upon anyone. Many receive it but some choose to reject it as is their freedom to.

In John 5 vs 39, 40 Jesus is speaking to the Jewish leaders who were criticising Him for healing on the Sabbath. He tells them:

'These are the very Scriptures that testify about me,⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.'

We hear Jesus' words again on this subject in John 12 v 48:

'There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day.'

In Acts 7 v 51 we hear these words of Stephen to the Sanhedrin, words that sealed his fate infact:

'You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: you always resist the Holy Spirit!'

He was calling them stiff-necked because they were actively resisting the unction of the Holy Spirit, not because they were ignorant of what God was doing.

In Romans 10 v 21 Paul states these words concerning God's attitude towards Israel:

'All day long I have held out my hands
to a disobedient and obstinate people.'

They have walked away from his saving grace nevertheless he has held out his hands to them.

As we have read, the scriptures reveal that God's mercy has been extended and received by those coming to salvation but that the same mercy has been rejected by those heading for destruction.

Spurgeon once said when preaching from Romans 9 that people are saved because of God and lost because of themselves. Mercy saves and justice condemns. Someone once asked him how he could reconcile these two views. "I have never reconciled friends" was his answer. We may find it difficult to bring these two truths together but scripture confirms each of them as being true. People are saved by God's grace alone and are condemned by their actions alone. God is responsible for the former and not for the latter. Spurgeon went on to say that no-one in heaven will ever say that they are there on their own merit just as no-one in hell will ever say that they didn't deserve it. No-one is saved by their works but all who are lost are condemned by them.

Ephesians 3 vs 28, 29

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

Isaiah 1 v 31

The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark; both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire.

Time to move forward in Romans 9 to the 13th verse: 'Jacob I loved but Esau I hated.' Now I'm not going to get into whether this is speaking about individuals or nations as it doesn't matter – either way the text is still troublesome here. Again people have taken this awkward verse to mean that God shows favour to one over another. Especially given that He was talking about two such close people. Not only were they from the same time period and nation and tribe, they were twin brothers. For about nine months they had been womb mates! Did He sovereignly decide, before they were born, that one would be blessed and the other not? And did He really love the one and hate the other?

Maybe the Hebrew will help us here – no, the word does mean 'hated'! Maybe The Message will give us a better rendering – oh no, even The Message says 'hated'. Now we know we are in trouble when not even The Message gives us any wiggle room! Okay, what light does the rest of scripture shed on our understanding of this verse? Is it meant literally? Did God in reality hate Esau?

John 3 v 16 again:

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

1 John 4 v 8

'Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.'

You see, it isn't as though God chooses to love, He is love personified. Everything He does is out of love, in love and through love.

In Acts 10 v 34 Peter shares at Cornelius' house the revelation that God gave to him:

'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.'

If God did not accept Esau it is because he did not fear him and do what is right. But God did love Esau – we know this to be true because the rest of scripture reveals God as a God of love to all who shows no favouritism. Jacob was no better than Esau in fact in many ways he was worse, but he received God's offered grace – God's unmerited favour.

So what of the phrase 'Jacob I loved and Esau I hated'? The phrase is in fact recognised by scholars to be a literary device, a Hebrew idiom. Now, an idiom is essentially a phrase that is

not meant to be taken literally. Every language has its own idioms which put across a meaning other than the literal one. In English we have many, for example:

- You're dead to me
- That will cost me an arm and a leg
- He hit the roof

Many idioms such as these examples are using an extreme to convey a particular meaning. Such an idiom would have been understood by the Hebrew readers much as we understand the idioms used in our language.

God was emphasising here that there was a big difference between the way He could relate to Jacob and the way he could relate to Esau. Jacob wasn't easy to have a relationship with. He spent a night wrestling with God on an issue didn't he? He used deception to steal a birthright. But God did have a relationship with Him. He is called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Bible. He is never called the God of Esau.

In essence a truer reading of the scripture would be 'Jacob I had a love relationship with but Esau I didn't have a love relationship with.' God loves all of mankind but not all have a loving relationship with Him and that's not for the want of trying on God's behalf. The absence of God's love is like hate just as the absence of heat is cold and the absence of light is darkness. Heat does not cause cold. Light does not cause darkness. It is the absence of heat that causes cold and it is the absence of light that causes darkness.

The truth about salvation and destruction is this: every person saved is saved solely by the grace of God, by God's undeserved favour. No-one has deserved salvation – it is a gift from God. Every lost soul on the other hand has fully deserved their fate and no blame lies at the hands of the Creator who sent His own Son into the world for their salvation.

One thing that confuses our understanding of scripture at times is the fact that God has foreknowledge of all events and people. God knew all about Esau and Jacob before the creation of the world just as he knew all about us. This is why so many Old Testament figures had names relating to their calling. 'Noah' means 'comfort' and his name would have been prophetically given just as Jesus' was. This does not mean that Noah was a robot created by God to do a job. God called him yes, but Noah answered. Likewise, those who are lost aren't created for destruction they are created for life but reject it. It shouldn't surprise us by the way that God has foreknowledge, only that He hasn't upgraded yet to the new five or six knowledge.

Finally, let us move on to yet another difficult part of the chapter, that relating to God's treatment of Pharaoh.

Romans 9 v 17

'For scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'¹⁸ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.'

The verse suggests that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh thus causing the greatest and most devastating series of plagues to come upon his empire. Again, a proper understanding of the Hebrew brings clarity to this curiosity. In the Hebrew it is common when a person allows something to occur that the language will read as though they caused it to be so. Because Pharaoh's heart was already against God and Moses, God allowed his heart to become hardened.

Robin stated last week that God's sovereignty and man's freewill live in harmony together. Scripture has many examples of this and here is one such example. Pharaoh has a choice as to how he acts in this encounter yet God at the same time controls the whole situation. To us this seems a paradox. How can God act sovereignly and yet allow people to have freewill? How can God carry out His plans and yet allow us our freewill all at the same time. It is indeed a paradox to us but not to Him. We must remember that we do not have God's mind or vantage point. But scripture tells us that one day we will know fully. Scripture does show us many examples of where God's plans and man's freewill work in perfect harmony.

For example, Joseph was sold as a slave to Egypt because of his brothers' resentment of him. Yet when the brothers are reunited Joseph makes this statement to them:

Genesis 45 v 5-11

'...do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

⁸ "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. ⁹ Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay. ¹⁰ You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me—you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.'

Another example is that of Christ being crucified. It was the Roman authorities that sentenced Him to death on a cross and the Jewish leaders that had plotted for it. Yet the Bible also reveals that it was the plan of God, prophesied in detail in Isaiah and the Psalms.

Romans 8 v 28 says 'In all things God works for the good of those who love Him.'

There are countless more examples that we can look at in the scriptures too - back to Pharaoh for a moment though. As I've already stated, some Hebrew verses in the Bible read as though God had caused something to happen when in reality He had just allowed it to happen. With regard to the final plague, the death of the firstborn, two verses in the Bible reveal this with total clarity. Let's look at both of them together.

Exodus 12 v 12

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD.

I love the fact God places I am the Lord at the end of that sentence to make it unequivocal that it is God who is doing the striking down of the firstborn? God is going to take their lives. Yet this wouldn't be in harmony with God's character as revealed by the rest of scripture.

2 Samuel 14 v 14 says:

For we will surely die and are like water spilled on the ground which cannot be gathered up again. Yet God does not take away life, but plans ways so that the banished one will not be cast out from him. [New American Standard Bible]

Exodus 12 v 12 gives the effect as if God is the cause. He is not. God does not take life. He is the author of life.

John 10 v 10

'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'

The truth of Exodus 12 v 12 comes when we read on further in Exodus 24 v 13:

When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.

When we interpret scripture in the light of the rest of God's word we see that we can trust the character and integrity of God. Never doubt it, even when verses may appear difficult.

James 1 v 17 says:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

There are things within the Bible and even within this chapter that I don't fully understand and that's fine to me. I used to be intent on understanding every part of scripture from Genesis to Revelation but wisdom has taught me that there are many things that I will not understand this side of eternity. Don't let those things that confuse you detract, distract, discourage or disturb you.

Psalms 100 v 5:

God is good and His love endures forever.

You can count on that verse.

I remember hearing this account of a wise theologian who was once asked what the greatest revelation had been during all those years of studying the Bible. His answer did not

relate to some great insight regarding predestination or God's sovereignty or some other cumbersome area of theology. Instead he just simply smiled and gave the following answer:

"Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

We would do well to remember the wisdom of this scholarly man. He hadn't allowed time, tricky verses in the Bible, his own expertise or life's experiences to distort his understanding of who God is and neither must we. We have an enemy the devil who prowls around like a roaring lion looking for those he can devour. He is the one who will twist and distort the image of our God if he can. We must not let him. God is good and His love endures forever.

Some things in life, like the paradox of freewill running along in complete harmony with the sovereign plan of God, cannot be understood this side of eternity. How can we possibly expect to understand all of God's vastness anyway? I believe when we look from His eternal viewpoint much more will make sense than it does now.

There are many paradoxes in the subject of Mathematics and it is not surprising to me that many of them can only be resolved with an understanding of infinity. I will do my best to demonstrate one such example to you. You may remember from school that the fraction one-third has the value of 0.3 recurring. That is to say it has the value 0.33333... without stopping. Two-thirds will therefore have a value equal to twice this, i.e. 0.6 recurring or 0.66666...without stopping. Three-thirds will therefore be three times 0.3 recurring which equals 0.9 recurring or 0.99999... without stopping. This however brings us up against what appears to be a tricky paradox because we also know that three-thirds must be a whole one. The paradox cannot be explained without the concept of infinity. If decimals were only written to three decimal places then the difference between 1 and 0.999 would be 0.001 and the two values for three-thirds would differ and thereby not be the same. If decimals were written to nine decimal places then the difference between 1 and 0.999 999 999 would be much smaller still (0.000 000 001) yet real enough to again make the two values of three-thirds different. It is only with the realisation that there are an infinite number of decimal places and that we can therefore never get to the last 9 which gives us the understanding that also we will never reach the 1 at the end of 0.000 000 000. Thus infinity resolves the seemingly impossible paradox. There is no difference between 0.9 recurring and a whole one. Just as in Mathematics many paradoxes are resolved with an understanding of infinity I believe that in the same way some the paradoxes we have in life will be resolved when we embrace eternity.

1 Corinthians 13 vs 9-12:

For we know in part and we prophesy in part,¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Now that's a day I'm looking forward to!

Thank you.