

## Romans: The Mystery of Righteousness (part 3 of 9)

### Why Does a Sovereign God Still Find Fault?

Romans 9:19-29

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*<sup>19</sup> You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"<sup>20</sup> But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"<sup>21</sup> Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?<sup>22</sup> What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,<sup>23</sup> in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—<sup>24</sup> even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?<sup>25</sup> As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'"<sup>26</sup> "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"<sup>27</sup> And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,<sup>28</sup> for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay."<sup>29</sup> And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah." Romans 9:19–29 (ESV)*

In a staff meeting this week, our Leadership Team was talking about the services last week in light of my sudden illness. We were rejoicing in the way that God still wove all the pieces together on relatively short notice. And as we gave Andrew some feedback on his sermon, one of our pastors said, "It was nice to be in Hebrews last week so we could breathe."

The statement was a funny and honest acknowledgment of what we all feel as we are making our way through Romans 9. This chapter is heavy, challenging, and even hard. There are glorious and weighty truths in this passage, and they create as many questions as they answer. And yet there is something really important here for us to think about and wrestle with.

Talking about the sovereignty of God, how it relates to our understanding of God's actions, and how it intersects with the experience of our own conversion is a great and beautiful mystery. There are amazing truths to examine here, and there numerous tensions to manage.

### What We Have Seen in Romans 9

I began our series with four pastoral admonitions, and I want to remind you what I encouraged you to consider:

- Remember that the God of Romans 8 is also the God of Romans 9
- Be willing to allow the Bible to shape and reshape your vision of God
- Embrace the tensions of hard texts

- Take the long view when it comes to deep and challenging truths in the Bible

Those four admonitions were important to hear at the beginning of Romans 9, but they are especially important right now as we are in the middle of this text and as we consider what is probably the hardest passage.

Second, let's remember why we are talking about all of this. Romans 9 is written because Paul anticipates that after someone reads all the promises in Romans 8, one might wonder how those promises could be true if the promises made to Israel have not come true. Israel's rejection of their own messiah and the shift in focus toward the Gentiles seems problematic. Israel's unbelief as it relates to the promises of God is the central issue. Paul's argument flowed like this:

1. God's promises are still being fulfilled to a remnant within Israel
2. The remnant was chosen by divine election
3. God secures His promises by grace and not by any condition in mankind
4. God is not unfair in securing His promises this way
5. He is free to be merciful and to harden whomever He wills because He is God
6. The ultimate value in the universe is the glory of God
7. Fairness and the security of God's promises are rooted in God being God

Two weeks ago we saw this argument most clearly in verses 17-18 as Paul quotes the book of Exodus and uses the example of Pharaoh:

*<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. Romans 9:17-18 (ESV)*

The main point that we learned two weeks ago was that the glory of God or the proclamation of His name in all the earth is more foundational than our assessment of what is truly right, fair, or just. Now it is not that God is unrighteous, unfair, or unjust. He is none of these. The issue is our ability to properly and correctly assess what is right, fair, or just as it relates to God. And that is why I used the illustration of an eight year-old crying foul about bedtime when older siblings are able to stay up. There are many times in life when one's definition of "fair" is skewed by the limits of what is able to be understood or seen.

What's more, it seems to me that most human beings have a way that they view life, a way that they make sense of the world, and it sounds like these three statements: "Life should be fair. I should be free to choose my own life. I need to make sense of my life." At one level all three of those statements are true, but they may not be true in the way in which we previously thought. Fairness, freedom, and understanding are vital parts of our humanity and Christianity. But Romans 9 teaches us that there is something more foundational in our fairness, our freedom and our understanding. What lies underneath is God's definition of fairness, God's freedom as God, and God's divine purposes that are beyond human comprehension.

### **Another Question: “Why Does God Still Find Fault?”**

Our text begins with another question that Paul anticipates being asked. This is the third question in Romans 9. The first one is implied in verses 1-13 as Paul anticipates someone asking about the problem of Israel’s unbelief. The second question is found in verse 14: “Is there injustice on God’s part?” And now we have a third in verse 19: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’”

Paul knows the kind of response that people will have to what he has just said about God having mercy on whomever He wills and hardening whomever He wills. He puts the issue front and center. Let me restate it for clarity: If God’s sovereignty means that He has mercy and hardens whomever He wills, then how can God still find fault with anyone since it all depends upon Him?

This is the plain reading of the text, and while the question is an uncomfortable one, it confirms that our flow of thought in verses 1-18 is correct. Paul highlights this question because it is a very natural question to ask in light of what he has just said.

In response to this question, Paul gives three answers.

#### **Answer #1: “God is God”**

The first answer is found in verses 19-22, and it highlights the difference between God as creator and human beings as creatures. Paul aims here to reestablish God’s place and ours.

*<sup>20</sup> But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”<sup>21</sup> Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? Romans 9:20–21 (ESV)*

There are a number of things to notice in verses 20-21. First, the tone of the answer indicates that there is more than a question being asked. Paul anticipates that a human being, after hearing Romans 9:1-18, is charging God with injustice. The wording “who are you, O man . . .” is most certainly a response to a complaint and not just a question, and the word for “answer back” means a disputation and resistance.<sup>1</sup> So part of the dynamic involved here is a question that reveals a lack of understanding or respect for the difference between man and God. To charge God with injustice is to forget who God really is, and that is why Paul uses this kind of tone.

Second, Paul uses a metaphor or an illustration in order to make the difference between God and mankind very clear. He picks up a familiar example of a potter and his use of clay in order to highlight God’s freedom as God to do whatever He pleases. As the potter, He has complete authority over the clay and is able to make vessels that have differing purposes. God was free to create Jacob and set His love on him, and He was free to create Pharaoh and not set His love on him. The potter/clay analogy is

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<sup>1</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998. Print. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.

meant to keep the categories of who God is and who we are in the forefront of our minds as we wrestle with the mystery of God's ways.

There are numerous Old Testament references to the potter and the clay. In Jeremiah 18 it is used for God's authority over the nation of Judah and His call for them repent. In Isaiah 29:16 the analogy is used for Judah's rebellion against God's rule in their lives:

*<sup>16</sup> You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"? Isaiah 29:16 (ESV)*

Therefore, the point of this illustration is not the specific Old Testament cross reference, but rather the familiar image of a potter who exerts full and free authority over the clay. The question about God's injustice fails to recognize who we are talking about and who we really are. God is the potter, and we are the clay. He is the creator, and we are his creatures.

Try as best as you can to see the issues here from God's perspective. Human beings have all fallen short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23) because we have exchanged the glory of God for a glory that we can manage, create, and control (see Rom. 1:23). Humans have exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). Creatures who owe their life and existence to God have corporately and individually rejected Him such that they deserve nothing but swift, divine, and eternal judgment. I think that part of our problem in looking at Romans 9 is the fact that we have too low of an appreciation for the treachery and the injustice of the rebellion of the human race. You see, God is not under obligation to save any single human being, and it is stunning and scandalous that He does.

Most people come to the issue of divine sovereignty and they ask, "Why didn't He save all of them?" And yet I think the angels must ask, "Why does He save any of them?" And I think that the difference behind those two questions relate to the lens through which you view yourself, the universe, the problem of sin, and God Himself.

Paul's first answer to the charge of injustice is simply that God is God. He attempts to remind us who we are talking about and what is underneath everything we are talking about. Paul reminds us that God is God. He is the creator, and we are His creatures.

It is easy to forget this, isn't it? As the highest of the created order, with all of our ingenuity and self-determination, the laws that govern our behavior and our created social structures, all based upon human understanding of fairness, we can easily forget that we are not ultimate. We can live so long in our normal, little human world that we forget that it is all dependent upon God. Suffering and the subject of God's sovereignty challenge our limited vision of reality. Coming to terms with God's supremacy and our frailty is humbling and traumatic but also comforting. It is humbling and traumatic to see who we really are, but it is also comforting to know that everything in the universe centers upon and is dependent upon God. "God is God" could be the most comforting thought ever, if we could let go of our need to have God justify Himself to us.

## **Answer #2: “His Purpose is to Show His Glory Through Mercy”**

The second answer to the question “Why does he still find fault?” is found in verses 22-23. Paul could have merely left the answer as “God is God,” and that would have been enough. But he plumbs a bit deeper and identifies the purpose behind God’s sovereignty.

It is the same approach that we heard in verses 15-18. First, we learned about God’s name and His freedom to show mercy to whomever He chooses (vv. 15-16). And then Paul identifies the reason behind the hardening of Pharaoh – “that I might show my power in you” (vv. 17-18). Paul moves from who God is to the purpose behind His actions.

He does the same thing here. Paul moves from who God is in verses 20-21 to His purposes in verses 22-23. Here is what the text says:

*<sup>22</sup> What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, <sup>23</sup> in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— Romans 9:22–23 (ESV)*

Now this text is challenging in terms of what it says and in terms of what it doesn’t say. Let’s start at the end and work our way backwards. What is Paul’s point here?

The point of verses 22-23 is that in order for God’s mercy to be mercy, there has to be another side of the coin. The other side of the coin is judgment, wrath, and destruction. Without judgment there is no possibility of mercy because mercy, by definition, means to not receive what was deserved. Without the possibility of receiving judgment, mercy isn’t mercy.

Second, in order for mercy to be glorious, it must be seen in the context of potential judgment. The reality of destruction makes mercy even more attractive and beautiful. Imagine, for instance, that you hear about a friend who had a major car accident and yet who was miraculously unhurt. You are grateful when you hear the news. But you are grateful at an entirely different level when you see pictures of the car on Facebook or Instagram. The context of what your friend was saved from magnifies and intensifies the beauty of his or her deliverance.

So the main point of these two verses is the way in which God’s mercy would be meaningless and the riches of His grace less stunning without the reality of judgment. What’s more, God Himself is not only full of love and kindness, but He is also full of righteous wrath against sin. This week we will celebrate Good Friday, and that day is the epitome of wrath and mercy. It is the day where God was amazingly merciful in providing the means of redemption, but that mercy came at the cost of incredible, horrific judgment. Think of even the way that we cherish the symbol of the cross, which is a symbol of both mercy and judgment.

What Paul says here in verses 22-23 is really nothing new. Mercy and judgment are more closely linked than what we often realize, and I don’t think that we often see the magnification of mercy as

justification for judgment. And yet that is what this text is saying. God aims to make His mercy gloriously known, and saving everyone would not accomplish that aim.

Therefore, I think this text pretty clearly tells us that there are people that God chooses not to save. As I read this text, and as I look at the world in which I live, it seems pretty apparent. Not everyone who is human becomes a follower of Jesus. But it is very important to remember that no one deserves God's mercy, and it's remarkable that he pours it out on anyone.

How does this help us with our original question: "Why does He still find fault?" It helps us by reminding us that 1) the ultimate goal in the universe is the display of God's mercy, and 2) no one deserves any mercy. God saving anyone is more unbelievable than we can possibly imagine.

### **Answer #3: "This is the Way God Has Always Worked"**

The final answer provides both an answer to the objection in verse 19 and a transition into the themes of chapter 10 regarding the way that God has dealt with the Gentiles. Once again, Paul grounds what he saying in the context of Old Testament passages so that the readers will know that he is not saying anything new.

Verse 24 serves as an introduction. After making the case that God's aim is to demonstrate the riches of His glory to vessels of mercy, Paul includes all those who are the "called" in this category. Verse 24 further applies verse 23: "... even us whom he had called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles ..."

Paul's point will become even more evident in chapters 10-11, but essentially he is highlighting the fact that God has granted surprising mercy to the Gentiles while preserving a remnant in Israel. This is shocking because the Jews would have anticipated that the Gentiles would be those under God's judgment, but instead, they receive mercy as if they were Jews. At the same time, most of the Jewish people were hardened, and only a small remnant was saved.

Again, God operates this way because He is God and because He has a purpose in the display of His glory which is beyond their comprehension.

Paul quotes two passages from Hosea regarding the inclusion of the Gentiles. Hosea was a prophet in the 8<sup>th</sup> century who ministered to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and he was commanded by God to marry an unfaithful woman as a symbol of God's faithfulness to an unfaithful people. Hosea was told to name his second child "no mercy" (Hosea 1:6) and his third child "not my people" (Hosea 1:9) as symbols of God's rejection of His people. However, God promises to reverse course, and the texts cited by Paul communicate God's mercy to those who do not deserve it.

<sup>25</sup> *As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.' "* <sup>26</sup> *"And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.' "* Romans 9:25-26 (ESV)

Paul uses these verses as an illustration of the way that God has now dealt with the Gentiles. They were not His people (not Israel) and yet now they are being called His people. God's mercy is

stunningly displayed though His kindness to the Gentiles. Remember that the Jews would have never anticipated God showing kindness to the Gentiles, and it is yet another example of God's surprising and unexpected mercy.

The second two passages are from the book of Isaiah, and they both refer to the inclusion of a remnant from disobedient Israel. The background of these texts in Isaiah is the national rebellion of the southern kingdom of Judah during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The people of Judah will be disciplined through the invasion of the Assyrians, and yet God is going to preserve a believing remnant.

*<sup>27</sup> And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,"<sup>28</sup> for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay."<sup>29</sup> And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah." Romans 9:27–29 (ESV)*

God's kindness to the people of Israel is just as gracious but in a different way. Even though the people of God have rejected God's rule in the life of their nation, and while they are under discipline, God is not finished with His people. God graciously preserves a remnant so that the nation does not become like Sodom and Gomorrah – a place of total and utter destruction.

So, Paul uses the Old Testament in order to show how his vision of God's sovereign grace has worked historically. The Gentiles were welcomed into the people of God despite the fact that they were historically considered outsiders and objects of judgment. And the Jews, who placed too much stock on their national heritage, are still treated graciously by virtue of a remnant of people who are still faithful.

Underneath this message of hope for the Gentiles and the Jews is the sovereignty of God. Gentiles would never seek God on their own, and the Jews would have passionately pursued a self-made righteousness. It was God's grace that sought out Gentiles, and it was God's grace that preserved a remnant. Left to their own devices, no Gentile and no Jew would ever be saved. The fact that any Gentile or Jew is saved is owed entirely to God's grace.

Putting these three answers together, we get a clear picture of Paul's answer when it comes to the charge of God's unfairness in light of His sovereign will. His answer is 1) to highlight who God is as God and who we are as creatures, 2) to identify the important linkage between judgment and the beautiful display of mercy, and 3) to illustrate the historical way in which God has worked in the Old Testament.

Romans 9 is meant to give us hope in God's promises because the beginning, the middle, and the end are dependent upon His grace alone. As the hymn-writer, Robert Robinson (1735-1790), said:

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,  
Prone to leave the God I love;  
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,  
Seal it for Thy courts above*

## **Pastoral Reflections on Romans 9**

We now come to the conclusion of our journey through the really hard sections of Romans 9, and let me give you some summary thoughts in three areas: thinking, feeling, praying, and living.

**Thinking:** Romans 9 pushes the envelope on our mental abilities, and it challenges some presuppositions about how the world really works. It reminds us that the difference between God's ways and our ways and the difference between who God is and who we are is far greater than what we naturally realize. This chapter gives us a painfully elevated vision of who God is. Yes, there are questions and implications left unanswered, but if you have to err, I would urge you to err on the side of God's sovereignty. I hope that you leave Romans 9 with a bigger view of God.

**Feeling:** Remember that everything in Romans 9 is meant to provide comfort in the way in which God keeps His promises. Sometimes this chapter, with all its tension, did not feel entirely comforting. But maybe there is something more helpful here than what we know. This passage points us to who God is, the beauty of His glory and magnification of His name as the ultimate reason for everything. In other words, the doctrine of divine sovereignty invites us to find comfort through trust, not by making sense of everything.

**Praying:** This text should encourage, not discourage, prayer in your life, especially for loved ones who do not know Jesus as Savior. Divine sovereignty is never at odds with the call for passionate prayer. Pray for an open door and an open heart. Pray that God would destroy the things that your loved one is trusting in. Pray that God would captivate his or her heart. Even a person who completely disagrees with my treatment of Romans 9 prays this way at some level. Why? Because the essence of prayer is asking God to do what cannot be done without Him. And while we do not understand how all of that works as it relates to His will, we are called to pray.

**Living:** A right understanding of Romans 9 should never decrease your passion for evangelism as if our actions in proclaiming the gospel do not matter. On the contrary, it should embolden you because it means that you are cooperating with God's activity, and the success of your evangelism is not dependent on your ability to share the gospel perfectly. What's more, this chapter should never cause you to resist coming to faith in Christ or following hard after Him because you fear that God has not set His love on you. To even wonder such things and to ask such questions is evidence enough that God is calling you and wooing you.

The beauty of God's sovereignty is that underneath everything in your life – both the blessing and the bruising – is the undeserved grace of God which is working out an eternal plan for your good and for God's glory. Therefore, keep trusting the One who keeps you trusting.

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