

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Lesson 21, Chapter 9 continued

One of the great theological questions within Christianity is: why did God judge only some of Israel, and not all, as being part of His “true” Israel? Or even more basic: what *is* “true” Israel (to use Paul’s terminology) as contrasted to the common or ancestral Israel that most of the Old Testament is about? Today, we will work towards attempting to answer those questions. Along the way the Apostle Paul is really going to meddle with your minds. Some tough issues and the obvious questions they raise among reasonable, thinking people are going to confront us head-on. Some of these questions are things that serious God-seekers (those who are not yet Believers) might ask, and if not given a proper answer they could just fold up their Bibles and walk away. So let’s focus today and learn how to understand and respond to these tough issues so that we can be the good and effective ambassadors for Messiah that we’re supposed to be.

Paul has spent a good portion of his time in penning this letter to the Roman congregations, addressing the issue of Israel’s election as God’s chosen people because clearly, as he explains salvation and the place of gentiles and why Jews must accept Yeshua, he didn’t want anyone to get the idea that somehow God had rejected all of Israel for the disobedience of some of them. He also didn’t want a false conclusion drawn that even though some of Israel (in fairness, probably most of Israel) refused to accept the Messiah that God had sent them, which opened the door to gentiles being offered the salvation of Yeshua that gentile Believers had (as a religious group) therefore replaced Israel (as a religious group) as God’s chosen people; His new elect versus His old elect, if you would.

So Paul uses the well known Jewish history of the Patriarchs to show a pattern for how God operates in His sovereign election of individuals and also groups of people to be His own, and as an illustration of what “true” Israel is as opposed to merely common or ancestral Israel. I want to pause, here, to say that the proofs and illustrations he uses once again make it self-evident that while Paul is certainly not excluding Roman gentiles, he has been for some time much more addressing himself to the Jewish Romans. I say self-evident because for one reason Paul referred to the Patriarchs as belonging to the Hebrews, and he referred to Isaac as “our” father (clearly a reference to his own Jewish heritage). For another reason Jewish history would not have been common knowledge or seem terribly relevant for gentiles. Although for Believing gentiles who studied the Torah they certainly would have at least heard of these Hebrew Patriarchs, the Patriarchs were in no wise part of their gentile cultural heritage. And, by Paul’s day, since it was the Synagogue where Jews met and where gentile Believers attended, then it was far more Jewish traditions and regulations (*Halakhah*) that were taught and discussed there rather than the Scriptural Torah. I think it is also an invaluable lesson for the modern Church to take Paul to heart and actually hear him in Romans 9 because Paul is using his own family history (the history of the Jewish people) as taken from the Torah to explain how salvation works and through whom God created the pathway to redemption. And redemption certainly did not come through chosen gentiles.

Let's re-read part of Romans chapter 9.

RE-READ ROMANS CHAPTER 9:10 – end

Since the main issue for the moment remains election, then the core question about election becomes: how, exactly, does God choose? How did God choose Isaac but not Ishmael? That's not too terribly hard for us to grasp because Abraham's two sons were born at different times to different mothers (one a slave girl, the other Abraham's legal wife). But how about Jacob and Esau? How did God choose Jacob over Esau, especially since they had the same mother; they even shared the same womb because they were twins. And, by all cultural custom, Esau was the firstborn since he emerged from the birth canal first. So how did God choose Jacob over his twin brother? After all; such a choice was not only irrevocable but also it would have far reaching and permanent effects on the lives of those children and their descendants. It gets even more dicey because, as Paul rightly points out, the choice was made while the children were still in the womb before either had a chance to sin or to prove their merit.

Then, using Jewish cultural terms, Paul says that in the case of Jacob and Esau, the older (Esau) will serve the younger (Jacob). It is hard for Westerners to understand in the ancient culture of Paul's day (and well before) just how upside-down and shocking the notion was of an older brother being given less authority and status than his younger brother. It simply is not something that is done; it is against all custom and tradition, and it is offensive and demeaning just to contemplate it. But Paul takes it even a step further by invoking the prophet **Malachi** to show that God made the decision to "love Jacob" but to "hate Esau". I want to point out a couple of things about this passage. First: it was common rabbinic methodology to invoke a short Scripture passage to back-up what they were saying. Or better, what they were saying is but a **midrash**, an interpretive discussion, of the quoted Scripture passage. At first blush we might say that this sort of sounds like how modern day Pastors tend to give sermons: they issue forth a verse or two of Scripture and then apply it to their subject. But that is not at all the same thing as we find the Rabbis, like Paul, doing. In modern Church sermons short portions of Scripture passages are regularly lifted from the Bible and used regardless of the actual Biblical context. It is only that the words chosen seem to somehow back-up what the Pastor wants to communicate. However the rabbinic method was that rather than spend the time and ink to write down the several OT verses to form the entire passage they are associating to their argument, they quote only a short portion of it that is familiar enough for a listener to recognize. The idea is that everything that is said about that passage (that is, the entire context) is supposed to come to mind. It is a rabbinical short cut as a means of identifying a section of Scripture. Why do that? Because in Paul's day and before, there were no chapter and verse divisions or markers. They couldn't say: "As it says in **Malachi** chapter 1 verses 1 through 5....." Rather, their only real choice was to quote a short passage as a reference point and expect the listener to know the rest of the passage. But my second point is about what, exactly, Paul was communicating with his quote of: "**Ya'akov I loved, but Esav I hated**".

Malachi 1:1-5 CJB

^{CJB} **Malachi 1:1 A prophecy, the word of ADONAI to Isra'el through Mal'akhi: ² "I love**

you," says ADONAI. But you ask, "How do you show us your love?" ADONAI answers, "Esav was Ya'akov's brother. Yet I loved Ya'akov ³ but hated 'Esav. I made his mountains desolate and gave his territory to desert jackals." ⁴ Edom says, "We are beaten down now, but we will come back and rebuild the ruins." ADONAI-Tzva'ot answers, "They can build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Land of Wickedness, the people with whom ADONAI is permanently angry. ⁵ You will see it and say, 'ADONAI is great, even beyond the borders of Isra'el.'"

In Bible-speak, in this context to “love” means to accept and embrace; to “hate” means to reject and separate. So the issue of the twins in Rivka’s womb was not that God had decided upon a beautiful fondness for unborn Jacob, but an intense dislike for the unborn Esau. Rather, Esau would be separated from his twin Jacob (as far as concerns his destiny and inheritance to the line of covenant promise that his father, Isaac, was given from his father, Abraham). Jacob was given the inheritance of the line of promise; Esau was separated from the line of promise. But as we see what happened historically, Esau became embittered because he felt insulted since he was the older brother, the firstborn, and by every human custom he and not Jacob should have inherited the line of covenant promise from his father. Esau fought God’s decision by bedeviling Jacob’s descendants thus bringing God’s anger and wrath upon himself. This is a big lesson for us when someone else gets what we think we had every right to (and by human standards it may, indeed, have been unfair).

Paul, in typical rabbinic fashion, anticipates the response from his straw man for God’s election of Isaac and then Jacob. “So”, says the straw man, “It is unjust for God to do this”. That is, it is not fair for God to choose Isaac over Ishmael since by human custom Ishmael is the legitimate firstborn. It is not fair for God to choose to accept Jacob as the heir to the promise but to reject Esau as the heir while they are still in their mother’s womb. None of those who were rejected had done anything wrong to deserve such a rejection, and none who were accepted had done anything right to earn such an acceptance. What is Paul’s response to this accusation from the straw man? “Heaven forbid!” Folks, I sure hope you see the implications for us and for all humans when we begin to see where Paul is going with this line of thought. God makes sovereign decisions about us based on some criteria known only to Him. Often, no matter how positively or negatively it might affect us, what we have done or what we think has nothing at all to do with God’s decision as concerns us.

To continue his response to the straw man’s accusation that God is unjust and unfair for choosing in the manner He does, Paul quotes a passage from Exodus. There God says to Moses: “***I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will pity whom I pity***”. So, to better understand what Moses is getting at, let’s do what **Rav Sha’ul** expects his readers to do: recall the Scriptural context for the passage he has just cited.

Exodus 33:14-20 CJB

¹⁴ ***He answered, "Set your mind at rest- my presence will go with you, after all."***

¹⁵ ***Moshe replied, "If your presence doesn't go with us, don't make us go on from here."***

¹⁶ *For how else is it to be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, other than by your going with us? That is what distinguishes us, me and your people, from all the other peoples on earth.* ¹⁷ *ADONAI said to Moshe, "I will also do what you have asked me to do, because you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."* ¹⁸ *But Moshe said, "I beg you to show me your glory!"* ¹⁹ *He replied, "I will cause all my goodness to pass before you, and in your presence I will pronounce the name of ADONAI. Moreover, I show favor to whomever I will, and I display mercy to whomever I will."* ²⁰ *But my face," he continued, "you cannot see, because a human being cannot look at me and remain alive.*

This entire passage is so interesting to go over, but I'll resist the temptation. What is pertinent to our subject is this: in verse 16 Moses says, "***I have found favor in your sight***". And, since Moses figures he has found favor in God's sight, he decides to ask something from God that he knows God has not granted to others. He asks God to show him His glory; and sure enough God does **not** grant that to Moses. However as a compromise God says He will show Moses His "goodness". Even more, God will show Moses how to pronounce His holy name, YHWH (I know the CJB says "Adonai", and other Bibles say "Lord"; but the original Hebrew says YHWH....Yehoveh). Then God addresses Moses' statement that he has found favor in God's sight by saying: "***I show favor to whomever I will, and I display mercy to whomever I will***". In other words: Moses', don't get a big head over this. You say you have My favor, but you haven't done anything to deserve it. I simply choose whom I do and show mercy to whom I do for reasons that have little to nothing to do with the person involved. Paul's point is this: even Moses, the father of the Torah and The Law...God's Mediator....was elected due to God's mercy and sovereign will; it had nothing to do with any outstanding quality of Moses or anything Moses merited.

OK. Moses was a good guy; a righteous man. In fact from an election standpoint only Yeshua stood above Moses among all humans ever born. But what about the other end of the scale? What about for the bad guys; the unrighteous? So Paul addresses that matter beginning in verse 17. This illustration that Paul uses is about God's confrontation, through Moses (the biblical epitome of a good guy), with Pharaoh (the biblical epitome of a bad guy). And God says to Pharaoh, the bad guy: "***It is for this very reason that I raised you up, so that in connection with you I might demonstrate my power, so that my name might be known throughout the world***". But it is not until we do what the good Rabbi Paul expects us to do (look at the passage in its fuller context) that we more deeply understand what he's getting at. Let me pause for just a moment. I hope you Bible students, American and international, see that you need a good study Bible that has similar attributes to the CJB in that the many New Testament texts, which are actually Old Testament quotes, are highlighted for you and you are given book, chapter and verse. Each time you come to an OT quote in the New Testament, you should turn your Bibles to that passage in the OT and read it in full; you should read all around that brief portion given in the New Testament to get the entire context. That was the expectation of the NT author because that was the norm for those days. Reading what little bit has been put down in our New Testaments and moving right along is not proper study. You must stop, look up the OT passage, and read it. Therefore, let's look at this passage in its larger context.

Exodus 9:10-18 CJB

¹⁰ *So they took ashes from a kiln, stood in front of Pharaoh and threw them in the air; and they became infected sores on men and animals.* ¹¹ *The magicians couldn't even stand in Moshe's presence because of the sores, which were on them as well as on the other Egyptians.* ¹² *But ADONAI made Pharaoh hardhearted, so that he didn't listen to them- just as ADONAI had said to Moshe.* ¹³ *ADONAI said to Moshe, "Get up early in the morning, stand before Pharaoh, and say to him, 'Here is what ADONAI says: "Let my people go, so that they can worship me.*

¹⁴ *For this time, I will inflict my plagues on you, yourself, and on your officials and your people; so that you will realize that I am without equal in all the earth.* ¹⁵ *By now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with such severe plagues that you would have been wiped off the earth.*

¹⁶ *But it is for this very reason that I have kept you alive- to show you my power, and so that my name may resound throughout the whole earth.* ¹⁷ *Since you are still setting yourself up against my people and not letting them go,* ¹⁸ *tomorrow, about this time, I will cause a hailstorm so heavy that Egypt has had nothing like it from the day it was founded until now.*

Paul, in verse 18, goes on to say that this passage in Exodus demonstrates that not only will God have mercy upon whom He will, but He will also harden whom He will (both ends of the scale). Wow. That's not how we like to think of God, is it? Want to know how God chooses? He's not telling. He just decides. So I'm just standing around, minding my own business, and God suddenly decides to harden my heart? Before we address that difficult matter, notice something else. Look at the OT passage that Paul quoted as it appears in your New Testaments (that is, verse 17). Where does that passage say one word about God hardening anyone (it doesn't)? And yet in verse 18 Paul acts as though he HAS said something about God hardening people and so Paul responds with: "God hardens whom He wants". See; this only works if we go to this passage in the Old Testament and read it more fully because indeed the brief Scripture passage Paul uses is Exodus 9:16. But when we take the time to go look up the entire chapter, we see that in direct relation to the passage Paul quoted, in Exodus 9:12, we read: "**And Adonai made Pharaoh hard hearted**". So THERE is the hardening that Paul was getting at (and expects his readers to understand), and this is a fine example of why we are to look up the entire passage.

Now to address the obvious question that, if you're paying attention, ought to have invaded your mind. God could just as easily harden my heart as He does show me mercy? And either way it seems often to have little to nothing to do with my actions. What does God do: flip a cosmic coin? So, Paul's straw man asks that very question (only a little more cleverly than I just did). The straw man asks: "**Then why does he (God) find fault with us? After all, who resists His will?**" Excellent question! If it is God who hardens us so that we have little choice but to let our evil inclinations be our Masters, and then the end result is that invariably we do wrong in God's sight (we sin), how can this be reasonably seen as OUR fault? After all; if God has the power to harden our hearts against our will (or at least without our knowledge), then

we are utterly powerless to do anything about it. So why do we bear responsibility?

And in an answer to that question that hardly reassures us, Paul says this in verse 20: "**Who are you, mere human being, to talk back to God?**" Those are Paul's words and they sound pretty arrogant. His response to his straw man is to not actually answer the question but to shame him: how dare you even ask the question? And just to make it clear that there is no misunderstanding in just how strong Paul is in his reply, he quotes Isaiah: "**Will what is formed say to him who formed it, why did you make me this way?**" Let us again go to the fuller text of Isaiah to understand Paul's reason for using this passage.

Isaiah 45:1-13 CJB

^{CJB} *Isaiah 45:1 Thus says ADONAI to Koresh, his anointed, whose right hand he has grasped, so that he subdues nations before him and strips kings of their robes, so that doors open in front of him, and no gates are barred: ² "I will go ahead of you, leveling the hills, shattering the bronze gates, smashing the iron bars. ³ I will give you treasures hoarded in the dark, secret riches hidden away, so that you will know that I, ADONAI, calling you by your name, am the God of Isra'el.*

⁴ *It is for the sake of Ya'akov my servant, yes, for Isra'el my elect, that I call you by your name and give you a title, although you don't know me. ⁵ I am ADONAI; there is no other; besides me there is no God. I am arming you, although you don't know me, ⁶ so that those from the east and those from the west will know that there is none besides me- I am ADONAI; there is no other.*

⁷ *I form light, I create darkness; I make well-being, I create woe; I, ADONAI, do all these things.*

⁸ *"Heavens above, rain down justice; let the clouds pour it down. Let the earth open, so that salvation springs up, and justice sprouts with it. I, ADONAI, have created it." ⁹ Woe to anyone who argues with his maker, like potsherd's lying on the ground! Does the clay ask the potter, "What are you doing?" or, "What's this you're making, that has no hands?"*

¹⁰ *Woe to him who asks a father, "Of what are you the father?" or who asks a woman, "To what are you giving birth?" ¹¹ Thus says ADONAI, the Holy One of Isra'el, his Maker: "You ask for signs concerning my children? You give orders concerning the work of my hands? ¹² I am the one who made the earth! I created human beings on it! I- my hands-stretched out the heavens, and directed all their number.*

¹³ *I am stirring up Koresh to righteousness, I am smoothing out all his paths. He will rebuild my city; and he will free my exiles, taking neither ransom nor bribe," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot.*

The person this passage is about is King Koresh; we know him better as Cyrus, the Persian king who defeated Babylon thus ending the exile of the Jews. Here is a King who has no

knowledge of, or relationship with, the God of Israel, and yet God is using Koresh and giving him great power. But.....notice that this entire passage in Isaiah centers around the continuing election of Israel as God's people: ***4 It is for the sake of Ya'akov my servant, yes, for Israel my elect, that I call you by your name and give you a title, although you don't know me.***

But even more, woe to anyone (Jew or gentile) who would dare to ask God why he is showing such favor to Cyrus (a gentile pagan), and why He is showing such mercy to Israel since they have been so unfaithful to Him that God finally exiled them to a foreign nation (Babylon) for their rebellion. The Lord makes it about as clear as it can get that He is sovereign over everyone and everything because He made everyone and everything that exists. We have no right; we are in no position, as His created to question any of the Creator's decisions. Why do bad things happen to good people; why do good things happen to bad people? None of our business; the Father of all things has decided and that's that. In Isaiah, do we hear the tone of a patient daddy lovingly answering His children's naïve questions? Or do we hear the tone of a powerful God who is in no mood to have His choices and decisions questioned by mere humans, who are little more than lumps of clay that God, in His mercy, has chosen to give the gift of animation?

And, we continually read that there is very little God won't do to other nations for the sake of Israel. Don't like that? Doesn't sound fair? Too bad; you don't get a vote. God's Kingdom is not a democracy.

And by the way: what we are hearing is exactly how Judaism in Paul's day saw it. Even in the Synagogue prayer book that is called the Siddur, in the regular weekday morning prayer we find this: "Who is there among all the works of your hands, among those above or among those below, who could say to you: What are you doing?"

I suppose it might be time to remind us all of something I taught about a long time ago: to love God is to obey God. All of our nice warm fuzzy feelings about God; all the nice things we say about Him; the way we defend Him when we talk to non-Believers; our prayers; walking through the doors of our congregation every time they are opened; that is all well and good. But God does not count any of those things as loving Him. Loving Him is when we are actively obeying Him. The second thing we haven't talked about in a while is asking God "why" concerning His decisions. "Why" is Greek thought, not Hebrew thought. "Why" says that we have a mindset that we have the right to know. "Why" is fundamentally arguing with God. As we just heard from Isaiah: ***9 Woe to anyone who argues with his maker, like potsherd lying on the ground! Does the clay ask the potter, "What are you doing?" or, "What's this you're making, that has no hands?" 10 Woe to him who asks a father, "Of what are you the father?" or who asks a woman, "To what are you giving birth?"***

So what Paul is saying is that we must acknowledge God as fully free and sovereign to assign to various humans different functions as He sees fit for the on-going fulfillment of the redemption of humanity and the world that is His purpose. Every function we're assigned will not be ones that we seek or ones that give us benefit in this life. Every function won't make sense to us. Every function won't be lovely, and many will be painful; some will feel most unfair.

But Paul is never very far away from the issue of validating God's ongoing election of Israel has His set-apart people. So in verse 22 he asks the rhetorical question: what if God, although He was quite willing to show His wrath to Israel so that they and their enemies both saw God's limitless power, nonetheless the Lord pulled His punches and with love and patience didn't destroy Israel when they deserved nothing less? Implied in this rhetorical question is: whose business is it other than God's why He is doing what He is doing?

But then Paul shifts course in verse 23. Now Paul asks the question: So what if God showed Israel both His wrath and His loving-patience in order to show the people who were outside of His elect (outside of Israel) what they could have if somehow they could become His people? And what could they obtain by becoming part of His people? His great mercy. And what if those people to whom He wanted to show His glory were a mix of both Jews and gentiles? Again, implied is: who has the right to say He should or He shouldn't purpose to do this even if the humans involved weren't particularly comfortable with it?

As the proof text of God's intentions, and that His calling out of common Israel and out of common gentiles a hybrid group, a remnant, that represents what Paul calls "true" Israel, a purified Israel that operates upon the ideals that God had always intended for those who worship Him, Paul uses the Book of Hosea. However he doesn't use this OT passage as he has with the other passages he has chosen. Rather, he uses it more allegorically since the entire subject of Hosea chapter 2 is Israel. That is, here Paul uses a passage that is purely about the Jewish people but reframes it to demonstrate that at some point God's people will not only consist of the physical descendants of Jacob (Israel) but will also include some number of gentiles. Hosea chapter 2 is so powerful that we would not be wise to pass it by.

READ HOSEA CHAPTER 2 all

Clearly these verses from Hosea serve a dual purpose for Paul. One: they continue validating his underlying theme in Romans of the ongoing election of Israel as God's people. And that despite God's wrath upon them, and His at times turning His back on Israel, He never abandons or rejects them completely. And two: that what is happening to and for Israel can also be applied to gentiles. Gentiles who were always *lo-ammi* (not my people) become, thanks to God's mercy, part of "my people". Without doubt the build up in Romans 9 that Paul has made to this point, making it clear that no one has a leg to stand on to question God's purpose and plans, is to bring us to the point of Hosea's prophecy whereby Paul is applying it both to the whole House of Israel **and** to gentiles. God's mercy is available to every human being on planet earth. Yet; who among Israel and who among the gentiles are elected to be "true" Israel is another question. The bottom line is that not all will be elected. There is some mysterious divine paradox at work because at one time there is an element of predetermination operating, and yet there is also another element of human freedom of choice involved. There is a redeemed Israel that consists of the descendants of Jacob on the one hand, and yet there is also another level of redemption for Israel that is Jewish Believers in Yeshua on the other hand. Then there are the gentiles who remain gentiles and have decided to worship the God of Israel through Messiah Yeshua, and yet God elects them as part of a purified "true" Israel even though they (we) are not Jews.

So Paul's message to us is this: at the end of the day, when all is said and done, it is God's sovereign will and God's unmerited mercy that are the twin drivers of human history, human destiny, and the divine plan of redemption and restoration of the world.

We'll conclude Romans 9 and get into chapter 10 next time.