



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

Chapter 9

In the first century, St. Paul faced the same accusation that he faces today: he was accused of hating the Jews. Because he argues that being a physical descendent of Abraham and following the Law do not necessarily render a person exempt from God's judgment, some people believed - and continue to believe - that he was in reality an anti-Semite.

The Apostle responds to this accusation in Romans 9:1-6. He vows that he is telling the truth - even calling the Holy Spirit as his witness - when he says that he feels "great pain and continual grief" over the spiritual situation of his ethnic brothers and sisters (9:2). He wishes that any condemnation they may suffer for their attitudes and behavior could instead be leveled against him (9:3).

He is proud of his heritage, because God gave to the Israelites tremendous blessings (Romans 9:4):

- The calling to adoption as children of God (Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1);
- The glory of the Divine Presence that resided in the pillar of fire, the Tabernacle, and Temple (Exodus 13:21-22; 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11);
- The covenants (Genesis 15; Deuteronomy 29; 2 Samuel 7; Jeremiah 31);
- The giving of the Law (Exodus 20);
- The proper worship of God in the Tabernacle and Temple (Hebrews 9:1, 6);
- The promises of the Patriarchs (Romans 11:28; Galatians 3:16); and
- The promise that the Messiah would come from Israel (Luke 1:34, 35; 3:23).

St. Paul concludes with a reminder that Christ, the promised Messiah, is the eternally blessed God Who is over all (Romans 9:5).

Ambrosiaster, a fourth century Christian, explains why St. Paul gave this detailed list of the blessings given to the Jews:

Paul lists so many indications of the nobility and dignity of the Jewish people and of the promises they received in order to deepen his grief for all these things, because by not accepting the Savior they lost the privilege of their fathers and the merit of the promises, and they became worse than the Gentiles, whom they had previously detested when they were without God. For it is a worse evil to lose a dignity than never to have had it.

The argument in the first six verses of chapter nine is important because it puts into context what St. Paul writes in the remainder of the chapter (as well as chapters ten and eleven). To understand what follows in these chapters, remember how St. Paul concludes Romans chapter eight: "(Nothing) shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39). Some Jewish Christians in the church in Rome would read this statement, look at what St. Paul writes in chapters two through

eight about the Law and national identity not guaranteeing God's favor, and ask, "But aren't you saying that we Jews *have* in fact been separated from the love of God? God promised us blessings, and here you seem to be saying that God in fact does not specially bless us! Are you saying that God lied, or He was mistaken? Did God fail us?"

St. Paul responds, "It is not that the word of God has taken no effect" (Romans 9:6). In other words, God's promise to bless Israel is true and has taken effect. The problem is that people tend to misunderstand *who* is included in this promise: who is a *true* Israelite? St. Paul points out, "For they are not all Israel who are of Israel" (9:6), meaning that not every physical Jew is actually considered part of the Israel to whom God has been faithful in His promise.

If this seems baffling to you, imagine how this point struck first century Jews: "Of course all descendents of Abraham - those who are *of* Israel - are part of Israel! How could some ethnic Jews *not* be considered part of this people?" Verses 7-13 answer this question.

St. Paul begins his answer by returning to the example of our Righteous Forefather Abraham (see Romans chapter four). He states that people who are descended from Abraham - those who are physically or ethnically Jews - are the children of God, but rather those who are descended from Isaac, and thus are the children of the promise (Romans 9:7-8). Abraham had a son, Ishmael, through natural means: he engaged in sexual relations with a slave woman, Hagar, and she conceived Ishmael (Genesis 16). Isaac, however, was conceived because God intervened and miraculously enabled Abraham's wife, Sarah, to conceive and give birth (Genesis 18:10; 21:1-7). This means that Ishmael was the "child of the flesh," whereas Isaac was the "child of the promise" (see Romans 9:9).

The concept of being a child of promise is even more recognizable when you look at the case of Isaac and Rebekah, and their twin sons, Esau and Jacob. It's easy to look at Isaac as a child of promise: he was miraculously conceived by a different mother than his half-brother, Ishmael. The same mother, however, conceived Esau and Jacob naturally, and yet Jacob - the younger brother - was the child of promise (Romans 9:12; see Genesis 25:23). If being a child of the flesh - a physical descendent of a Patriarch - is essential to receiving God's blessing, then Esau should have been a child of the promise. God, however, chose only Jacob to be a child of the promise - not because of anything that Jacob did, since he was chosen before he was born - but because it served God's purpose (Romans 9:11).

What, exactly, does St. Paul mean when he quotes Malachi 1:2, 3, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated?" First, you should know that it does not mean that God personally disliked Esau and liked Jacob. The Holy Prophet Malachi uses this statement to demonstrate God's hatred for the evil deeds of the nations the Bible says descended from Esau, and His love for the nation of Israel. St. Paul extends this point to demonstrate that God has the power and authority to sovereignly call one person or group to a special purpose, and to not call another person or group.

It is easy for people to read this point and immediately cry, "God is unfair! He shouldn't give special blessings to one person or group! Everyone should share equally in the blessings!" This objection in essence accuses God of being unrighteous: accusing God of being unrighteous is a terrible error (Romans 9:14). God is not required to equally bless all people - He instead says, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion" (9:15; see Exodus

33:19). His mercy and compassion are not dependent upon people desiring them, or even on people working desperately to earn them; He is free to bestow His mercy on whomever He chooses (9:16).

A prime example of God's authority is the Pharaoh who opposed God's demand (through Moses and Aaron) to free the Israelites from slavery. Pharaoh is portrayed in Exodus 7-14 as opposing God because his heart was hardened. Pharaoh's hardened heart served God's purposes, for God put him into his monarchical position in order to show God's power and contribute to glorifying God's name (Romans 9:17; see Exodus 9:16; Galatians 3:8). St. Paul is able to conclude from Pharaoh's example that God "has mercy on whom He wills" (the Israelites, whom He mercifully freed from slavery when they had no other hope), and "whom He wills He hardens" (referring to Pharaoh, who is described in Exodus as having his heart hardened by God) (Romans 9:18).

We need to stop for a moment and look at exactly *how* Esau and Pharaoh served God's purpose, and God's interaction with them. Holy Scripture makes it clear God foresaw that Esau and Pharaoh would serve evil, and therefore put them into situations where their evil attitudes and actions would serve His greater purpose. God predicted to Rebekah that Esau and his descendents would serve his younger twin Jacob and Jacob's descendents (Genesis 25:23); Esau - presumably ignorant of this prophecy - demonstrated that he deserved this reduced status by selling his birthright as the eldest son to Jacob for a bowl of pottage (Genesis 25:29-34). Similarly, Pharaoh is described as hardening his heart to the plight of the Israelites after the first four plagues sent by God against Egypt (Exodus 8:15; 32; 9:12, 34); it was only after Pharaoh repeatedly demonstrated his hatred for God and His people that God is described as hardening Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8).

We've looked at these situations in order to see what God was *not* doing: He was *not* causing Esau and Pharaoh to sin. Some people - and, unfortunately, even some Christians - believe that such statements as "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" means that God directly caused Pharaoh to rebel. This would mean, in essence, that God was responsible for their sins. This, however, is impossible, as the Holy Apostle James tells you, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (James 1:13-14). Venerable Bede, a British monk of the seventh and eighth centuries, explains St. James' teaching, "He wants to dispel the notion that the God who puts good thoughts into our minds also fills them with evil intentions. No one who has such wicked thoughts in his mind should ever try to claim that they came from God."

Pharaoh serves as a perfect example of this point. The Church Fathers indicate that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, not by forcing him to become evil, but instead by being patient with him. St. John Chrysostom tells you that "God endured Pharaoh for a long time in the hope that he might repent, but even when he did not do so God was patient with him in order to display his own goodness and power, even if Pharaoh gained nothing from it." Oecumenius, bishop of Trikka in the tenth century, also writes, "God's power is patience, and it is a very great power indeed. For who would not be overawed by the enormous patience of God? For he says that it is for this reason that he has agreed to let Pharaoh rule, that it may be shown how patient he is." Even Pelagius, whose teachings on grace were condemned by the Third Ecumenical Council in 431, observes, "There are those who say that Pharaoh was hardened by God's patience, for after a plague from God was over Pharaoh became harder, and although God knew that Pharaoh had not repented he nevertheless wanted to show his forbearance even toward him." We

can say that God hardened Pharaoh in part because He allowed Pharaoh full rein to indulge his arrogant, evil desire for ruthless power, but also because He knew that even His merciful patience with Pharaoh would be used - as far as Pharaoh understood - for evil.

All of this revolves around God's mercy. Everything St. Paul writes in this section points toward the tremendous mercy of God. God mercifully chose Abraham to receive a tremendous promise; God chose Jacob to become a Patriarch; He mercifully chose Moses to be the prophetic leader of His people. None of these individuals deserved the grace shown to them by God - it was all God's mercy. Conversely, in the cases of Esau and Pharaoh, we can see how God simultaneously withheld His mercy. He could have equally divided the inheritance between Esau and Jacob, He instead allowed Esau to suffer the consequences of his actions in order to further show His mercy to Israel. Likewise, He could have spared Pharaoh the death of both his son and later himself, but He withheld His mercy so that His love and care for Israel would be shown in their deliverance from slavery.

The problem with believing that it was God's will that Esau and Pharaoh rebelled - with misunderstanding God's mercy, and believing that He should not have "hardened" Esau and Pharaoh so that they suffered their disastrous consequences - is that it leads to the accusation that God is unfair. "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will' (Romans 9:19)? A first century Jewish reader might have read St. Paul's argument to this point and wondered, "If Esau and Pharaoh's sins were God's will, and were so important that He hardened Pharaoh precisely so that Pharaoh would sin, how can He condemn Jews for sinning? Hasn't God simply hardened Israel? God is acting hypocritically!"

St. Paul criticizes the arrogance (and ignorance) in such a statement. Who are we - mere humans, the creation of God - to criticize our Creator's actions (Romans 9:20)? The Orthodox Study Bible concisely answers, "When one truly understands who God is, the objections vanish (see Job 42:5, 5). It is ours to obey, not to call God to account. We yield our wills to God's will as *clay* yields itself to *the potter* (v. 21)." The issue is God's authority and supremacy: God is not only not obligated to behave according to our wishes, but he also would not be God - He would not be perfect - if He were forced to reduce His perfect plan to our limited understanding. Christians must always remember God's words through the Holy Prophet Isaiah: "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Just as some people misunderstand St. Paul's teaching about Esau and Pharaoh, so they also misunderstand St. Paul's point in Romans 9:20-21. Such people believe these verses teach that God deliberately makes some people eligible for salvation ("one vessel for honor") and others ineligible for salvation ("another for dishonor"). The Church, however, has never understood this to be St. Paul's teaching. The Fathers instead consistently emphasize that those people who are described by St. Paul as dishonorable vessels have chosen this status through their sinful lives; they therefore are not forced to be dishonorable, but instead the lives they have chosen are used by God to serve His purpose. St. John Chrysostom explains:

Here it is not to do away with free-will that he says this, but to show, up to what point we ought to obey God. For in respect of calling God to account, we ought to be as little disposed to it as the clay is...When

he does go on to say, "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor?" do not suppose that this is said by Paul as an account of the creation, nor as implying a necessity over the will, but to illustrate the sovereignty and difference of dispensations; for if we do not take it in this way, divers incongruities will follow for if here he were speaking about the will, and those who are good and those not so, He will be Himself the Maker of these, and man will be free from all responsibility. And at this rate, Paul will also be shown to be at variance with himself, as he always bestows chief honor upon free choice. There is nothing else then which he here wishes to do, save to persuade the hearer to yield entirely to God, and at no time to call Him to account for anything whatever. For as the potter (he says) of the same lump makes what he pleaseth, and no one forbids it; thus also when God, of the same race of men, punisheth some, and honoreth others, be not thou curious nor meddling herein, but worship only, and imitate the clay. And as it followeth the hands of the potter, so do thou also the mind of Him that so ordereth things. For He worketh nothing at random, or mere hazard, though thou be ignorant of the secret of His Wisdom. Yet thou allowest the other of the same lump to make divers things, and findest no fault: but of Him you demand an account of His punishments and honors, and will not allow Him to know who is worthy and who is not so; but since the same lump is of the same substance, you assert that there are the same dispositions. And, how monstrous this is! And yet not even is it on the potter that the honor and the dishonor of the things made of the lump depends, but upon the use made by those that handle them, so here also it depends on the free choice. Still, as I said before, one must take this illustration to have one bearing only, which is that one should not contravene God, but yield to His incomprehensible Wisdom.

Theodoret, a fifth century bishop of Cyr in Syria, further tells you about this passage:

Those who are called vessels for menial use (or, in the New King James Version, vessels "for dishonor") have chosen this path for themselves... This is clear from what Paul says to Timothy: If anyone purifies himself from what is ignoble, then he will be a vessel for noble use, consecrated and useful to the master of the house, ready for any good work (see 2 Timothy 2:21).

Related to misunderstanding verses 20-21 as referring to God forcing people to be good or evil is the belief of some Christians that these verses refer to God choosing individuals for salvation or condemnation. Alan F. Johnson, a Protestant biblical scholar, points out that this interpretation - common among those holding to the Reformed Protestant understanding of predestination - is inaccurate:

It is important to note that up to this point in the chapter there is really no concrete evidence to argue that Paul is talking about choosing some individuals for eternal salvation or for eternal condemnation. Rather, he has been arguing that God has perfect freedom to be merciful to whomever He wills and in a manner that He Himself chooses.

Returning to the text itself, St. Paul explains that God has been extraordinarily patient with people who rebel against Him - the "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" - in order to show His great mercy to those who faithfully worship Him ((Romans 9:22-23). Again, we should note that the rebellious "vessels of wrath" have prepared themselves for destruction through constant rebellion against God. Fr. Lawrence Farley teaches that St. Paul is writing about the way in which the majority of first century Jews

had hardened themselves through consistent rebellion against God, culminating in their rejecting Jesus Christ as their Messiah:

It is not the case that God hardens innocent hearts, overriding free will, so that Israel has no choice regarding whether or not to rebel and reject Jesus. This hardening is the same as other hardenings and judgments in the Old Testament, in that it comes as the long-delayed punishment of sins that were once freely chosen. The Jews of Paul's day have long rebelled against God's will, and now, in Christ, judgment has finally fallen upon their pride, hardening them in their rebellion.

We have reached a crucial point in St. Paul's argument. St. Paul anticipates that - based upon his earlier teachings about the Law and relationship with God - his Jewish readers might believe that God has been unreliable (Romans 9:6), unrighteous (9:14), and/or unfair (9:19). His response through verse 23 is that God not only has the right to condemn people who rebel against Him, but also that God has been infinitely patient with them during their rebellion. Now that they have rejected Jesus Christ, however, God is exercising His divine right to render judgment against those who reject Christ.

God's right to judge and condemn, however, is only part of the teaching. St. Paul now turns his attention to God's mercy and those who are saved by it. God has called not only the Jews into a relationship with Him, but also the Gentiles (Romans 9:24). God gave special blessings to the Jews (9:4), and they have experienced the advantage of a special relationship with Him, but the call to relationship has mercifully been given to *all* people.

Notice how St. Paul phrases this point in verse 24: he writes it as a question. In other words, he is essentially asking, "Would you believe that God has prepared not only Jews, but even Gentiles, for a glorious relationship with Him?" Then, as if to respond to his own rhetorical question by saying, "It's true, and our own Hebrew prophets prove it," he spends the remainder of chapter nine explaining how the Old Testament proves that God extends His offer of a merciful relationship to all people.

St. Paul begins this section by quoting from Hosea 1:10 and 2:23, proving that God will call people Who were not His - the Gentiles - and make them His people (Romans 9:25-26). He also quotes several passages from the Holy Prophet Isaiah - 1:9; 10:22, 23; 13:19; 28:22 - to prove that God has saved Israel from total destruction for their sins by incorporating non-Jews into the blessed people of God (Romans 9:27-29). Israel's salvation is therefore not simply a reward for *past* faithfulness - Isaiah points out that Israel has been unfaithful - but instead is a merciful gift to those who are *currently* faithful to God.

First century Jewish readers would interrupt at this point: "The nation of Israel has worked hard to observe the Law for over a millennium, and now you're telling us that this wasn't good enough? You're saying that Gentiles - who lived degenerate, filthy lives - can suddenly be adopted as a child of God while Jews are condemned?" The problem, St. Paul says, is that the Jews were not observing the Law as part of a faithful, loving relationship with God; they instead believed that nominally following the rules obligated God to bless them (Romans 9:31-32). The Gentiles, however, attained to righteousness precisely because they knew that they were incapable of earning salvation; they instead humbly accepted the salvation that God mercifully offers them through Jesus Christ (9:30).

Jesus Christ is the key to attaining “the righteousness of faith.” Those who were self-righteous (see Romans chapter two) were - and still are - unable to humbly accept that they need to be in relationship with Christ, and are unable to truly be righteous and complete human beings without Him. As the Holy Prophet Isaiah prophesies, Jesus therefore becomes a stumbling block - an obstacle over which people trip and hurt themselves - to those who refuse to accept Him, but the salvation of those who *do* accept Him (Romans 9:33; Isaiah 8:14; 28:16). St. Gennadios, patriarch of Constantinople in the fifth century, interprets this passage: “Paul calls the Lord Christ a stumbling stone because those who did not accept the new covenant in him stumbled over him and by their unbelief fell from the grace of justification which was given to men through him.”