

The Sovereign Mercy of God

Romans 9:14-18

Broadcast Dates: April 21-22
Steve DeWitt

We continue our Romans series now in chapter 9. By any measure, this chapter represents the deep end of the doctrinal pool. Paul transitions from the inseparable love of God in chapter 8 to the sovereign grace of God in chapter 9. He uses the story of Israel's heroes to show that God has always distinguished in the giving of his saving grace. Abraham fathered Isaac and Ishmael, but only Isaac was under God's saving grace. Isaac had twin boys, Jacob and Esau. They were the same in nearly every respect—same grandfather in Abraham, same dad in Isaac, same mom in Rebekah, same womb. Indeed, they were twins. Yet before they were born or had made any more moral or spiritual decisions, God chose Jacob and not Esau. God has always exercised a distinguishing grace. Some are saved. Some are not. What is the cause that explains the difference? God's sovereign grace.

Today we move into a section that theologian James Montgomery Boice called the most difficult passage in the Bible. I don't think it's the most difficult to understand, but I do agree it is one of the most difficult to receive. As we teach about the deeper doctrines of salvation, I want to set a few ground rules for us as a church: **1.** Right doctrine humbles us—if anyone gets arrogant or argumentative, you can know they don't really understand this teaching. There are some things here that good people can disagree on as long as we disagree agreeably. **2.** A doctrine about sovereign love should make us love others more. Election is about God's mercy and love. Far from cloistering us, it should move us outward toward other people because election is about God's love coming to us. **3. Mystery**—if anyone acts like they have this all figured out, it's someone who doesn't begin to understand it. There is mystery, and difficult things that are beyond us. Leave a lot of room for mystery and let the unfathomable move your heart to worship our infinite God even more.

"What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. 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." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." (Romans 9:14–18 ESV)

This section is about pairs of two. Two men. Two Old Testament quotations. Two conclusions drawn.

Two men—Moses and Pharaoh. Paul continues to draw on Old Testament history to prove his assertion that God is the ultimate cause in salvation. He also continues to pair brothers, one of whom received mercy and one who didn't. Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac yes. Ishmael no. Jacob and Esau. Jacob yes. Esau no. And now two brothers of a different kind. Moses and Pharaoh. Moses was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter giving him royal status in the Egyptian court. Presumably, these two would have grown up together and raced chariots around the Sphinx if we are to believe DreamWorks version in the animated movie *The Prince of Egypt*, and my personal favorite song, "You are Playing with the Big Boys Now" by Martin Short and Steve Martin.

So, God chose Jacob and not Esau? God gave Jacob saving grace and not Esau. Among first-century types, what do you suppose was the number one objection to Jacob being chosen by God and not Esau?

That's Not Fair!

Here is how Paul says it, "*What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?*" (Romans 9:14)

This isn't the first time Paul has taught this or wrote about this. Paul preached and taught everywhere he went. He knew how people generally responded to what he was saying. Here we are on an important point. The fact that Paul immediately addresses the sense that election seems unfair proves that unconditional election is what he was actually teaching. We see the same in verse 19 when he addresses the objection, then "*who can resist his [sovereign] will?*" If he wanted to clarify what he was saying, he could have done so to make sure everyone knew he wasn't suggesting that God was the ultimate decider in salvation. But he does the opposite. He doubles down.

"*Is there injustice on God's part?*" I don't suppose we are that different from the first-century folks who viewed justice through a lens of fairness. Sameness. To the modern man this increasingly means that everyone must be the same. Same opportunities. Same outcomes. Participation trophies for all. Everyone must be the same or we cry out, *That's not fair!*

This is the world I am living in currently with a six-year-old and a four-year-old. "Daddy, why does Kiralee get more Cheez-its than me?" "Daddy, Madeline didn't pick up as many toys as I had to pick up!" Last night there was a kerfuffle over toothpaste. One had red toothpaste; the other had blue. The one with the blue toothpaste said to me, "Why does she get to have the red toothpaste?" And I thought to myself, a sermon illustration! You know what I never hear? "Daddy, why does she get to have more peas than me?" Ever notice that?

Our outrage over fairness is very subjective. What Paul says is, the human measure of fairness isn't ultimate to God. Can we really accuse God of not being fair? Of being unjust to save Isaac or to save Jacob? To save anyone and not save everyone?

Paul's response is one he's used before in Romans. It is the strongest objection allowed by the Greek language. *God forbid! No way! May it never be so!* OK. Paul. Prove it. Prove that God says he doesn't give mercy to everyone the same.

"*For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'*" (Romans 9:15)

When did God say this? In Exodus 33 when Moses asked to see God's glory. God says no man can see my face and live. But he does agree to show Moses the backside of his glory, to declare his name to Moses, and then says, "*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*" (Exodus 33:19) This declaration by God means God reserves unto himself the right to grant mercy and compassion to whomever he desires.

Paul's conclusion from this is, "*So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy*" (Romans 9:16). In other words, the category of justice or fairness is

entirely the wrong category. The basis of salvation is the will of God and the mercy of God. This isn't a justice issue, this is a mercy issue.

We should be forever joyful that is a mercy issue and not a justice issue. Let's go back to that womb of Rebekah. There is little Esau. There is little Jacob. Which of them deserved to be saved? Neither. So, what would be justice? Both Esau and Jacob under the wrath of God forever? If God shows mercy to Jacob and not to Esau, is there an injustice done? Has Esau been wronged? If you begin with the presupposition that Esau deserved God's grace and deserved to be saved, then if he isn't saved, that's injustice. But if Esau's life and sin deserved God's wrath and God gives him what he deserves, is there an injustice done? No.

What about Jacob? Jacob deserved wrath, but God chose to place his grace and mercy on Jacob and paid the price for Jacob's guilt via Jesus' death on the cross. Is God unjust to grant mercy?

That's the point. We really don't want justice. If you read Romans 9 and shake your fist at God and say, *I don't want mercy, I want justice*, if God answers that prayer, you go to hell.

My journey into these doctrines was blessed by the teaching ministry of R.C. Sproul. I attended a conference where he explained mercy and justice by telling a memorable story of when he was a college professor and had a class of 250 freshmen. On the first day of class he went through the syllabus and said,

"You have to write three short term papers, five pages each. The first one is due September 30 when you come to class, the second one October 30, and the third one November 30. Make sure that you have them done by the due date, because if you don't...unless you [have a medical emergency], you will get an F on that assignment."

The day came when the first paper was due. 225 had it with them. 25 didn't. Those who didn't have it done pleaded with Professor Sproul, *give us a few more days. We're freshmen. We're stupid. This is all new.* He relented and said, *you have three more days.*

The second term paper date came and this time 200 had it and 50 didn't. He said, *"Where are your papers?" Well, you know...midterms, homecoming...* They pleaded with him. He relented and said, *you have three more days.*

The third due date came and this time 100 students came with the term paper and 150 didn't. They came in to class cool and calm. He said, *"Johnson! Do you have your paper?" "Don't worry about it, Prof, I'll have it for you in a couple of days."* Sproul took the grade book and said, *"F." Nicholson, do you have your term paper? "No." "F."* Then someone shouted, *"That's not fair!"* Sproul said, *"Fitzgerald, was that you?" "Yeah, it's not fair."* Sproul said, *"Weren't you late with your paper last month?" Yeah.* Sproul said, *"If it's justice you want, it's justice you will get."* He changed his grade from October to an F. He looked around the class and asked, *"Who else wants justice?"¹*

The minute we think we are entitled to grace we leave the realm of mercy and enter the realm of justice. As sinners, we don't want justice. No. We want and desperately need mercy.

¹ R.C. Sproul, "An Inalienable Right to Grace?" www.ligonier.org, December 9, 2011.

So, then it doesn't depend on human will or exertion. What's the "it"? Salvation. The Greek word for exertion is *trek*. It's like a run requiring exertion. We are not saved by our will or choice or sweat, but we are saved by God who has mercy. And we should be glad or in perfect fairness, we all to go hell. As someone has said, *"If we end up in hell it's our fault. If we end up in heaven, it's God's fault."*

If you are tracking with me, you might be thinking, *but when I became a Christian, it felt like I was choosing Jesus. I chose to believe, so how can it be God's choice before it's my choice?*

"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.' So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." (Romans 8:17-18)

This quote from Exodus 9:16 is part of what God wants Moses to tell Pharaoh before the seventh plague of hail. Within this warning God tells Pharaoh why he was raised to power in Egypt. All of Pharaoh's attempts to thwart Moses and Israel are actually the canvas for God's power to be displayed and his name to be proclaimed. Pharaoh's hard heart was for God's glory. As Justin Taylor points out, what's fascinating is that three times God says he *will* harden Pharaoh's heart. Seven times it says God *hardened* Pharaoh's heart. Three times Pharaoh *hardened his own* heart.²

This doesn't mean sometimes it was God and sometimes it was Pharaoh. And here lies some mystery: Pharaoh hardened his heart in a way in which he was morally responsible, and God sovereignly hardened Pharaoh's heart to display his glory. This is a paradox, but then I told you, we are in the deep end of the pool.

"So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." (Romans 8:19) We want to talk about Pharaoh's heart, but Paul wants to talk about God, specifically that God is sovereign over the giving of mercy and the hardening of hearts. I know the question some of you have and you're going to have to wait until next week, *how did hardening Pharaoh's heart bring God glory?* Not just Pharaoh, but what about the Hitlers and Stalins and Pol Pots or the bully at work or the bully at the playground? Next week. *All About Him.*

Let's stay on Paul's point, *how is this "fair"?*

It is very helpful to think about another category of rebellious beings and how God treated them.

Is God fair in his treatment of angels and demons?

Hang with me here. There is the other category of created beings known as the angelic realm. There was a rebellion in the angelic realm led by Lucifer, the highest angel. He is better known as Satan. Lucifer was the most beautiful and powerful angel whose heart filled with pride. He looked in the mirror and said, *Mirror, mirror on the wall who's the fairest of them all?* Like the evil queen in *Snow White*, Lucifer couldn't handle anyone being more beautiful than him, even if it was God. So, he led a rebellion against God. Thousands, maybe millions of angels went with him. We call them demons.

² Justin Taylor, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart, www.thegospelcoalition.org, January 4, 2012.

God cast Satan and all the demons out of heaven. But do you know the whole story? Peter writes this, *"For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment..."* (2 Peter 2:4)

What? It would seem not all are in hell and certainly Satan isn't there yet. But apparently many, many are already in hell. They sinned and it was instant hell. Instant justice. How do we feel about that? I say, *good riddance. They got what they deserved. This place is better without them.* I'm going to guess no one here has lost any sleep about the demons in hell or feels particularly bad for them. We rather like God giving them their comeuppance. Their chickens have come home to roost. They got "fair."

Why was it instant hell for them and we humans get Jesus sent to us with an offer of salvation for all who believe? Does that seem fair? Perhaps we should petition God and say, *we don't think it's fair that the demons are treated different from us. We want fair.* But we don't really want parity with the demons, do we? We desperately need God to choose to treat us in a fundamentally different way from the demons.

If we could choose an aspect of God's glorious being that God sovereignly chooses to glorify himself through us, which one would we choose? How many say wrath? *No. We don't want God to glorify his wrath in us.* How many say justice? *No, we don't want his justice glorified in us.* How many say, holiness? *No, we don't want his holiness glorified in us.*

And from the back a small voice says, *what about mercy?* If God was to sovereignly choose to glorify his mercy in us; what would that look like? How might God go about doing that? One sinner says, *what if rather than giving us what we deserve, God gives us what we don't deserve?* Another sinner says, *what if God chose to not hold us guilty but pardons us?* A third says, *if God wants to glorify his mercy in us, not only would we **not** get hell forever, somehow, he makes it possible to give us heaven forever.* And all the sinners gasp, *how could that ever happen?*

And onto the stage steps Jesus Christ. Scars in his hands and feet. His cross the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Full satisfaction for God's wrath. A Savior for all who trust in him. The cross of Jesus is the answer to how God can glorify his wrath AND save sinners by mercy. Praise God he has not treated us like the demons or by a human measure of "fair" but has chosen to display the astonishing depth and breadth of his sovereign mercy in us who are saved.

"The wonder is not that some are saved and others not, but that anybody is saved at all." (John Stott)³

Where does this leave us? Proud? Entitled? Nose in the air? No. This humbles us as we realize there's nothing here to take credit for. No. We look at Pharaoh's hard heart and say, *there but for the grace of God, go I.*

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016).* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

© Steve DeWitt. 2022. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include The Journey (<http://thejourney.fm>) or Bethel Church (<http://www.bethelweb.org>) website on the copied resource.

³ John Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, p. 269.