

ROMANS 9-11

ROMANS 9:1-29 | WEEK 1: FEB 7, 2016

INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS 9:1-29

History of Salvation and Jewish-Gentile Relationships

The end of Romans 8 was and is glorious, meant to lead us to one of the highest points of Christian celebration and reflection. But in the present life such moments are always balanced by the sorrowful realization of the dark shadow which the bright light now casts. Paul's discourse in Romans 9 begins with a passionate statement of his anguish over the unbelief in the gospel, by and large, of his fellow Jews (9:1-5). This is followed by a narrative defense of God's faithfulness, freedom, and mercy (9:6-29).

PRIVELEGES AND TRAGEDY OF ISRAEL

Paul has great anguish for Israel (9:1-3)

Theirs is the adoption, glory, covenants, law, temple, promises, and patriarchs (9:4-5)

ABRAHAM'S TWO FAMILIES

Not all Israel are Israel (9:6-7)

The children of the promise are Abraham's offspring (9:8-9)

GOD'S PURPOSE AND JUSTICE

God chooses according to his mercy (9:10-18)

Many people feel uneasy reading these verses, and that uneasiness comes to boiling point at verse 13. Paul quotes from Malachi 1:2-3. But we should reflect on what Malachi himself meant when he said that God loved Jacob but hated Esau. The point the prophet was making was that this now increased the responsibility, and culpability, of Israel. The thrust was not, you are special so you can sit back and take it easy. It was always, you are special, so why are you taking God for granted, failing to honor him, and ignoring your call to carry forward his promises? God's choice never results in easy, arrogant, automatic superiority. Much is expected of those to whom much is given.

God declared to Moses that he will proceed with his plan for the Exodus even though the people have made the golden calf, amounting to a declaration of independence from the true God. That is the setting for the passage in Exodus 33 which Paul quotes in verse 15. It then appears (verse 17) that God is doing with Israel itself what he did with Pharaoh. God works even within that human rebellion and arrogance to bring about an even more glorious work of rescue.

Is that fair? Who are you to talk back to God? (9:19-21)

The passage about the potter and the clay is taken from Isaiah 29:6 and 45:9 with echoes of 64:8 and also of Jeremiah 18:1-6. They tell of a stage in Israel's history when God was struggling with rebellious Israel, like a potter working with clay that simply wouldn't get into the right shape. The image of potter and clay was not designed to speak in general terms about human beings as lifeless lumps of clay, over against God as the only living, thinking being; it was designed to speak very specifically about God's purposes in choosing and calling Israel, and about what would happen if Israel, like a lump of clay, failed to respond to the gentle molding of his hands.

The point Paul is making here is that God has not yet arrived at the moment when the clay goes in the oven and comes out solid, so that from then on the only options are either to stay the way it is or to be smashed to pieces.

GOD CALLS A REMNANT

This is so his glory would be known (9:22–29)

This is not intended to defend the predestination of some individuals to salvation and others to damnation, but rather the freedom of God to surprise people with mercy and ultimately to glorify them (cf. 3:23; 5:2; 8:18, 30).

The present passage, reaching its climax in this image of potter and clay, is in fact a continuation of the story which Paul started in verse 6—the story, that is, of Israel in the OT. We move from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to the time of the Exodus from Egypt, with Moses leading the people out despite the opposition of Pharaoh.

Paul is continuing to tell the story of Israel, the story which began with Abraham and the other patriarchs, which continued through the Exodus, and which now reaches the period of the prophets.

This passage must be read in context as offering precedents for God's surprising merciful activity in and through the gospel. If it is read—as it often is—as a theological treatise on predestination rather than as a testimony to God's mercy and faithfulness, Paul's main concern in chapters 9-1 will likely be missed.

References:

Gorman, Michael J. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004, pg. 379-383.

Wright, N. T. *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 2*. Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, pg. 1-21.