

The Book of Romans

Lesson 10: God's Sovereign Mercy and the Gospel for All -- Romans 9:1-10:21

Paul has just finished the highest peak in the letter, the inseparable love of God in chapter eight. And then his tone changes completely. I am speaking the truth in Christ, he says, I am not lying; I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. What could bring a man down from such a height into such grief? It is his own people. Most of Israel, who had the covenants, the law, the temple, the promises, and from whom the Messiah came, had rejected their own Messiah. Paul says he could almost wish himself cut off from Christ for their sake. This is not cold theology written from a comfortable distance. These chapters are written through tears.

The hard question pressing on Paul is this: if Israel has largely rejected the gospel, has the word of God failed? Did God's promises fall to the ground? Paul's answer fills these two chapters, and it moves along two tracks that he refuses to let go of either one. On the first track, he insists that God is sovereign and free. God has always had the right to choose how He would work out His saving plan in history, which line would carry the promise, that He would include the Gentiles, that He would save a remnant. God is the Potter; we are the clay. He shows mercy to whom He shows mercy, and no one can call Him to account.

But Paul will not let that sovereignty be twisted into the idea that people are mere puppets with no real choice. On the second track, running right alongside the first, he insists with equal force that the gospel call is genuinely for everyone and that people are truly responsible for how they respond. The same chapters that exalt God's freedom also declare that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, that there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, and that whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame. Israel did not stumble because God shut them out; they stumbled because they pursued righteousness by their own works and refused to submit to the righteousness of God in Christ. They heard, and they would not.

So these are demanding chapters, and they have been fought over for centuries. But read them with both tracks in view and the picture is clear and beautiful. God is sovereign, free, and merciful, working out a saving plan that no human failure can defeat. And God is just, holding out His hands all day long to a people who are genuinely able to come, pleading with them to be saved. Hold those two truths together, resist the temptation to collapse either one, and you will find here not a cold decree but the anguished, sovereign mercy of a God who wants all people to call on His name and be saved.

Group Discussion: Paul says he has great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart over his own people who have not received Christ (9:1-3). What does Paul's grief teach us about how we should feel toward those around us who are lost, and how can a congregation cultivate that same anguished love rather than indifference toward people who do not yet know Christ?

Personal Reflection: Paul declares that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, and that there is no distinction, for the same Lord is generous to all who call on Him (10:12–13). Is there anyone you have quietly written off as beyond the reach of the gospel, too hard, too far gone, too different? How does the truth that the gospel is genuinely for everyone challenge the limits you have placed on God's mercy?

Read Romans 9:1–10:21

Study Questions

1. Paul opens with deep grief over Israel, listing their privileges: the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises, the patriarchs, and from them the Christ (9:1–5). What does this passage reveal about the place Israel held in God's plan, and why is their rejection of the Messiah such a profound sorrow to Paul?
2. Paul's heart breaks for the lost to the point of unceasing anguish (9:2). Be honest about your own heart toward people who do not know Christ. Do you carry any real burden for their salvation, or have you grown comfortable and indifferent? What might begin to soften your heart toward the lost the way Paul's was?
3. Paul insists the word of God has not failed, explaining that not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and that it is the children of the promise, not merely physical descendants, who are counted as offspring; he points to God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau (9:6–13). What is Paul teaching about how God has worked out His saving purpose through a line of promise rather than mere physical descent, and why does this mean God's promises have not failed even though many Israelites rejected Christ?
4. Paul shows that belonging to God has never been a matter of mere physical descent or heritage but of being a child of promise (9:6–8). Are you tempted to rest your standing with God on something external, your family, your church background, your religious heritage, rather than on a living faith in Christ? What does it mean for you personally to be a child of the promise?
5. Paul anticipates the objection that God is unjust, and answers that God said, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, that it depends not on human will or exertion but on God who shows mercy, and that He even raised up Pharaoh to display His power and hardened him (9:14–18). How does this passage uphold God's sovereign freedom to show mercy as He chooses, and why is it important to understand this as God's right to work out His redemptive purpose, including His use even of a hardened rebel like Pharaoh, rather than as God arbitrarily creating some people for the purpose of damning them?
6. Paul marvels that God's mercy depends not on human will or effort but on God who shows mercy (9:16). Think about your own salvation. Where would you be if God had given you only what you deserved rather than His mercy? How does remembering that your standing rests entirely on God's undeserved mercy guard you against both pride and despair?
7. Paul uses the image of the potter and the clay, defending God's right as Maker to shape vessels for different purposes, and reveals His purpose to call a people, including the

Gentiles and a remnant of Israel, as vessels of mercy (9:19–29). What does the potter and clay image teach about God's sovereign right over His own creation and His redemptive plan, and how does Paul use it to explain the inclusion of the Gentiles and the saving of a remnant rather than to teach that God predestines individuals to hell?

8. Paul pictures us as clay in the hands of the Potter (9:20–21). It is humbling to be the clay and not the potter, to trust God's wisdom and purposes even when we do not understand them. Where in your life are you struggling to submit to God's shaping, wanting to question the Potter rather than trust Him? What would it look like to yield to His hands this week?
9. Holding these chapters together, Paul explains why Israel stumbled and the Gentiles were included: Israel pursued righteousness by works and stumbled over Christ the stumbling stone, refusing to submit to God's righteousness, while the Gentiles attained righteousness by faith; for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes, the word of faith says confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, and faith comes from hearing the gospel that has gone out to all (9:30–10:21). How do these chapters hold together God's sovereign freedom (chapter 9) with the genuinely universal gospel call and real human responsibility (chapter 10); why must we reject both the idea that God unconditionally elects some individuals to salvation and others to destruction and the idea that people are unable to respond; and how does Paul make clear that all people are truly able to call on the Lord and be saved?
10. Look back across these two demanding chapters. Paul has shown you his anguish for the lost, God's faithful and sovereign working of His plan, His free mercy, His right as the Potter, the universal call of the gospel, and the genuine responsibility of every hearer. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Romans 9:1–10:21 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 25:21–23 and Malachi 1:2–3, the choice of Jacob and the nations descended from the brothers; Exodus 9:12 and 8:32, the hardening of Pharaoh and Pharaoh hardening his own heart; Joel 2:32 and Acts 2:21, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; 1 Timothy 2:3–4 and 2 Peter 3:9, God's desire that all people be saved and reach repentance; Acts 10:34–35, God shows no partiality but accepts those who fear Him from every nation