

God's Word Has Not Failed Romans 9:1-29

After shouting, “**Yeah!!!**” at the end of Rom 8, some come to Rom 9 w/ “**What you talkin bout Willis?**” We might expect Paul to go from that exalted language of God's love straight to the *application* – but that doesn't come until **ch 12**.

What we actually find is a very complex portion of the letter in chapters 9-11.

In chapter 16, we learn that Tertius was Paul's scribe. James Dunn says that he could imagine Paul telling Tertius after chapter 8 to go home for rest of the day, and get some sleep before starting on chapters 9-11!.” Bring an extra falafel for lunch, it's going to be a long one!

Though these chapters are challenging, they shouldn't be neglected.

- Some see Romans 1-8 as “Gospel,” and 12-16 as “Application,” and 9-11 as “Puzzle,” with a few verses in 10 useful for a gospel tract!

But Chs. 9-11 have much to teach us about God's sovereign freedom; His mercy and justice; his saving and surprising grace and love.

9-11 make up **unit, and should be studied together.**

- If you only study **Ch. 9**, you may be tempted to think everything is up to God, and we have nothing to do.
 - The focus is on God's sovereignty, election, & his purposes in history.
- But if you only study **Ch. 10**, you will be tempted to believe it's all up to you!
 - The focus is on human responsibility; the necessity of believing/evangelizing.
- In **Ch. 11**, Paul puts both God's sovereignty and human responsibility together, and then concludes with a **doxology**.

Look at this doxology: **Verses 11:33-36:**

- How does Paul end Rom 9-11? **God's ways are “unsearchable & untraceable.”**
- That's an important ending to this section!
- **It's very difficult for my little 3 ounce fallen brain to grasp everything in 9-11!**
- **But this is an inspired Apostle saying that God's ways are unsearchable!!!**
- How do you hold to both God's comprehensive sovereignty and humanity's personal responsibility?
 - It's **mysterious**. **That's not a cop out answer!**
 - If you think you have all of this figured out, then **you know more than Paul!!!**
 - **Deut 29:29** – “The secret things belong to the Lord.”
- **Paul ends these three chapters in worship before our Sovereign God.**
 - That's **what these chapters should do to us**.
- **Paul's not writing as a cold, analytic philosopher, but an awe-inspired worshiper.**

11:36: “For from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things...” (11:36)

- **Not** “For from Him, and through Him and **to me** are all things....”

- God is not a “me-centered” God. God is a *God-centered* God.

So let’s **keep all three chapters in view** because (1) it gives us a needed balance on **sovereignty and responsibility**; (2) it keeps us mindful of the infinite wisdom of God, and (3) **it’s one big discussion about what God is doing in redemptive history.**

The Big Question in 9-11: Has God’s Word failed?

Romans 9:6 is the thesis of 9-11. Virtually every evangelical scholar affirms this. It climaxes with his statement in 11:26-29.

“Can God be trusted to do what he said?” Is God’s Word reliable?

- The reason the question is asked is concerning *Israel*.
- What is Israel’s place within the purposes of God?
- **If God is not faithful to His promises to Israel, then how can I know I can trust Him?**
- The problem that Paul is wrestling with is this:
**Did God not promise to send the Messiah to Israel and to bless His people?
 Why then is the church made up of largely Gentile believers!?**
 - Book of **Acts**: Who was more likely to believe? The Gentiles!
 - Paul’s harshest opponents were Jewish!
 - What’s up with this?
- **Paul wants the readers to know that what God is doing now, is perfectly consistent with what He has promised in the Old Testament, and how He has worked in history.**

So now, we are looking at **Ch. 9 today**, which highlights **the sovereignty of God.**

Setting the Stage for the Argument: The Tragedy of Israel (9:1-5)

Paul contrasts Israel’s **privileges with her current state.**

- They were given so many privileges but did not act on them.

Paul is **deeply concerned** for his Jewish kinsman according to the flesh.

His primary identity was “Christian,” but that didn’t mean he didn’t love fellow Jews.

V. 1-2 – He confirms his anguish. Positively (I speak the truth in Christ) and **negatively** (I am not laying), and then add my **“conscious bears me witness in the Holy Spirit.”**

- Some Jews were **suspicious** of Paul’s loyalty to them.
- After all, he was the “apostle to the Gentiles.”

2 – “great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart”

- **Paul goes from the pleasure and wonder of the gospel in chapter 8 to being broken-hearted for those who don’t know this joy.**

V. 3 – The extent of His anguish: Willing to be “cursed and cut off from Christ....”

- This implies that many Jews are under God’s judgment.
- Paul is willing to trade places with them!
- Well, he can’t. He sounds like **Moses** (Ex 32), “Blot me out for their sake.”

So why such agony? It's simple: Because many Jews are not saved!

- **“Like Mike, if I could be like Mike...”**
- **To be like Paul means not only to have the theology of Paul, but also to have the heart of Paul.**
- **You and I may not be able to grasp all the nuances of God's sovereignty in chapter 9, but we should all have a **burden for those separated from Christ.****

VV 4-5: Israel's privileges:

- ***They are a special nation (9:4a).*** “Israelites” - their special position in salvation history.
- ***They were adopted (9:4b).*** Paul implies a “national” adoption (Ex 4:22), not the type of adoption that refers to *salvation*, as in 8:16, 23.
- ***God revealed His glory to them (9:4c).*** God's presence was with Israel.
- ***They have been given the covenants (9:4d).*** God made an everlasting covenant w them.
- ***God gave them his law (9:4e).***
- ***They had the privilege of worshiping God (9:4f).***
- ***They were given promises (9:4g).*** The greatest promise: the Messiah (9:5).
- ***They had a godly ancestry (9:5a).*** That is, the patriarchs.
- ***They are the people from which Christ came (9:5b).*** This Christ Paul adds is “God.”
Something that most Jews did not believe.

All of this, and yet many did not believe on Jesus.

- **John 1:11** – “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”
- **Romans 9:32** – “They stumbled over the stumbling stone.”

This broke Paul's heart.

- **This sets the stage for the following section.**
- **What's up with this? How do you explain Israel's rejection?**

Let me point out three truths about God's sovereign freedom:

#1: God is working out his sovereign purposes in history (9:6-13)

A. Main Idea (9:6a): Has God's Word failed? No!

- **By word, he means God's **promise** to Israel. (Cf., Rom 3:3)**
- **“Not” actually begins the sentence! It's emphatic.**

B. Explanation (6b):

Here's Paul's answer: God never promised that every Israelite would be saved!

- **Not every physical son of Abraham will be saved.**
- **That's not the promise, and it never was the promise!**
- **The fact that the Jews didn't believe doesn't contradict God's promises, because he never promised that they would all be saved!**
- **God never promised salvation to all of Israel; He has always chosen some within the nation of Israel to be his true people [a “remnant,” v. 27]**
- **God's promises to *true Israel* have never failed.**

- There is an Israel by **birth**, and some who have been **called** to belong to true Israel. (Cf., **Rom 2:29**).
- **V. 8:** There are children of “promise” and children of “flesh” (**v. 8**).
- God has reserved the sovereign right to determine who His people will be (**v. 7-29**)
- God can and has chosen to include the **Gentiles** (**v. 24-29**).

So then, if only a minority of Jews responded to the gospel, then that’s not out of step with what God has always done, and with what God has promised.

- God is working out his purposes in history.

C. Illustrations (7-13)

Paul shows that his **teaching is not a new idea**.

A. Isaac over Ishmael (7-9)

7a: Abraham had these two sons. But God’s covenant was est through **Isaac**.

- Remember the story, Abraham had a great promise in **Genesis 12/15**, but had seen no child.
- So he had Ishmael by Hagar, an Egyptian maid of Sarah, when he was 84.
- Abraham thought by this act he would have offspring he needed to make the promise come true.
- But **no**. **Genesis 17:19**. God promises that His barren wife will have a son, and that He would establish my covenant with him. (para)

7b: Paul quotes Genesis 21:12 in verse **7b** to ground his assertion.

- “**named**” in the ESV can be rendered “**called**” or “**reckoned**.”
- The chosen offspring doesn’t come through **human achievement but by miracle**.
- **Salvation is of the Lord!**

8: Only the children of promise are Abraham’s offspring.

- There’s an Israel within Israel.

9 – A loose quotation from Gen 18:10 or 18:14 is a reminder of God’s gracious miracle, which enabled Sarah to bear a child of promise.

Application:

1. Inheriting salvation is not based on birth alone; but God’s gracious intervention.

- Salvation is not **by birth, or works, but by grace**.
- **Kids:** It’s a privilege to grow up in a Xian home, but you must believe (Rom 10:9)!
 - Kids, your parents are **sinners**. Do you know that?
 - “**Who is a sinner? Is papa a sinner? Oh yeah. Is Mama, No!!**” Wrong.
 - Kids, your parents are also **weird**.
 - Your parents are saved by grace, not works, nor sinless perfection (Abraham certainly wasn’t sinless, and neither was Jacob!).
 - **Your parents are like you, only older!**
 - And you can only be saved by grace in Christ, not by your parents faith.
 - “**God has no grandchildren, just children**” (Corrie Ten Boom)

2. It's important to keep in mind that God's promise to Abraham was for all the earth to be blessed.

- Through this line, through this promise, THE Offspring would come: Christ.
- Now, all who call on Him will be saved.
- God's sovereign election *had the nations* in view.

B. Jacob over Esau (10-13)

Paul makes the same point in these verses. Round 2.

One might think, "Well, it was because Ishmael's status, as the son of Hagar, an Egyptian maid or because he mocked Isaac (Gen 21) that God chose Isaac not Ish."

Paul goes one generation down to say *otherwise*.

It has nothing to do with status or works, or race, but grace.

Jacob and Esau and not only the same mother, but the same father, and not only that, *twins!*

10: Rebekah's sons were the product of one single act of conception.

11-12: God's sovereign freedom.

11: "before birth, and before they could do anything **good or bad**"

- "the younger older will serve the younger" – God's sovereign choice of Jacob reversed the birth order. "**In order that God's purpose of election might stand.**"
- Jacob's status was not based on works but upon God who "**calls.**"
- "call" means "summons."

12: Jacob's experience of grace wasn't based on **works** but on God's **calling**.

- Salvation is not based on your **descent**, your **good deeds**.
- **Nor did God look ahead and see Jacob doing good things, and say, "Okay, I'll choose him."** No, Jacob was a deceiver.
- God didn't choose us for anything good in us.
- "I believe in the doctrine of election, because I am quite sure that if God had not chosen me I would never would have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chose me afterward." (Spurge)

13: This is a quotation from Malachi 1:2-3.

- "**hate**" is most likely a Semitic idiom for "**chosen status**" rather than *emotion* (Bird).
- God **set his saving love on Jacob, not Esau.**
- **Neither of them deserved to be saved!**
 - The **context of Malachi** is that the kingdom of Edom will suffer devastation and their efforts to rebuild will be *thwarted*; whereas, Israel (Jacob's descendants) has **failed to be grateful, but will still experience restoration.**
 - God set his love on Jacob, even though he doesn't deserve it!
 - Why? **Deut 7:7-8**, "Why did God love Israel." "I loved you because I loved you"

The last issue here to deal with is the names "**Jacob and Esau.**"

- Some modern interpreters take these names to mean “**nations**” or the “**political fortunes**” of Jacob and Esau, since in Malachi they represent nations.
- So they argue for “**corporate election**” in this text, not “individual salvation.”
- I however agree with Moo and Schreiner that it is unlikely for several reasons.
 1. **Paul hasn't left the topic of salvation (9:3).** He's not willing to be damned because things are going bad *politically/nationally*; these verses are about **salvation**.
 2. **He uses the phrase in verse 8 as “children of God”** – Paul always uses that phrase in the context of salvation.
 3. **He uses the word in verse 11 of “election”** – usually has salvation in view.
 4. **He contrasts works/calling in verse 11** – again, that's salvation language.
 5. **I don't think Paul would have rehearsed the details of the lives of Isaac and Jacob and their brothers, if he didn't have in mind personal salvation. It is hard to imagine that he shift to a corporate idea without any warning in verse 13.**

Of course, affirming Gods' sovereign election doesn't mean we believe humans and puppets in God's hands, with no responsibility.

- **Stott: “We have also to remember that Esau forfeited his birthright because of his own worldliness and lost his rightful blessing because of his brother's deceit, so that human responsibility was interwoven with divine sovereignty in their story.”**

Divine sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation are not logically contradictory.

- **We affirm several truths that are hard to reconcile: Christ's divinity and humanity and the divine and human nature of Scripture.**
- **God's sovereignty and human responsibility are friends, not foes.**

With all that said the point is clear: **God's Word has not failed.**

- It was and is being fulfilled in **an Israel within Israel.**
- In His sovereign freedom, God has always chosen a people for himself.

#2: God's ways are just and his salvation is merciful (9:14-18)

V. 14: Like a good teacher, Paul anticipates a question.

- **By raising the question, you show they you understand that Paul is talking about God's sovereign election!**
- If salvation is based on someone's worthiness, then no one would raise the question, Is there injustice in God?

14b: Answer: “By no means!”

- Paul can't fathom the thought of God being unjust.
- The judge of all the earth always does what is right.

15-18: Two Parts: Each with an Old Testament quote, then an application.

Paul shows that God's mercy stressed to Moses and God's judgment of Pharaoh is fully compatible with God's justice.

A. Part 1: Exodus 33:19: (verses 15-16)

15: Paul explains why God is not unjust or unrighteous from this text:

(1) He appeals to God's sovereign freedom; and

(2) He appeals to God's mercy, which no human being deserves.

• Far from unjust, God is merciful, gracious and compassionate!

• **Stott:** "The wonder is not that some are saved and others not, but that anybody is saved at all. For we deserve nothing at God's hand but judgment. If we receive what we deserve (which is judgment), or if we receive what we do not deserve (which is mercy), in neither case is God unjust. If therefore anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God's. This antinomy contains a mystery which our present knowledge cannot solve; but it is consistent with Scripture, history and experience." Mic drop.

Remember the context of Exodus 33.

• Right after Exodus 32 – golden calf, right after he had freed them!

• **It would be like committing adultery on one's honeymoon!** (Schreiner)

• **None of the Israelites deserved mercy!**

• "Oh we put some gold in a fire, and a calf came out!" God showed mercy.

16: "It" (salvation/God's favor) does not depend on human will or exertion, but on God's sovereign mercy.

• Yes, we choose, but that's a gift of God's grace; because God draws sinners to Himself.

B. Part 2: Ex 9:16 (Verses 17-18)

17: God displayed His glory and broadcasted his name and power in the Exodus event, as Pharaoh refused to release Israel from bondage.

• **Stott:** "That Pharaoh hardened his heart against God and refused to humble himself is made plain in the story. So God's hardening of him was a judicial act, abandoning him to his own stubbornness."

18: God is free to leave some in rebellion, and to save others.

God's actions are just. He is glorified in salvation and judgment.

• Remember Romans 3. All human beings are sinful and guilty in God's sight (3:9, 19); thus, no one deserves to be saved.

• If therefore God leaves some in their rebellion, he is not being unjust, for that is what their sin deserves.

• **If, on the other hand, he has compassion on some, he is not being unjust, for he is dealing with them in mercy.**

• Our only hope is in God's mercy!

#3: God has the right of a potter over his clay (9:19-29)

19: Another question Paul anticipated: "Why does God still blame us?"

• **He doesn't try to resolve the issue of divine sovereignty and human responsibility!**

- Instead he gives **a rebuke** and corrects our view of God!
 - Please, note Paul is **not opposed to humble questions**.
 - If you humbly ask, “I can’t understand all of this.” **Join the group!**
 - He’s rebuking the proud individual who arrogantly refuses to believe in God’s sovereignty.

God has the right of a potter to shape his clay, and we have no right to talk back to Him (20–21).

20: Paul switches to **playing offense**.

- He raises the question: “Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?”
- Paul reminds the objector of their **creaturely status** – “o man.”
- Who do you think you are with your limited knowledge, with a sinful man?
- **Do you think you can tell God how to run the world!?**
- **“Our God is in the heavens, He does all that He pleases.”** (Psalm 115:3).

20b-21: Paul then alludes to a rich OT background of a potter **with his clay** to illustrate **God’s work among people**. (the closest text to verses 20-21 are Isaiah 29:16; 45:9; the closest to verse 22 is Jeremiah 18:6-10)

- Of course, **humans are not mere lumps of clay**.
- But the analogy is fitting – **The Potter is free**.
 - The clay doesn’t give the demands to the potter. **(20b)**
 - God has the right to do with the clay as He pleases **(21)**
 - Some clay is used for honorable use, and some for common use.

Instead of talking back to God, the appropriate thing for us to do is bow down before God, the Sovereign Potter.

- Like Moses, we should take off our sandals for we are on holy ground when we approach Him.
- Like Job, after receiving God’s rebuke, we put our hand over our mouth, and we submit to “the Godness of God. (Job 42:1-6)
- When everything seems to be crumbling, we should be comforted by Paul’s reminder to Timothy, “God’s firm foundation stands. The Lord knows who are His.” (2 Tim 2:19)

22-23: God is merciful in salvation and just in his wrath (22-23).

22 – God “endures” – He’s patient ... but He will exercise wrath, as Pharaoh experienced, and those who have not bowed the knee to Christ will experience.

23: **Mercy is only appreciated and perceived as mercy when against the backdrop of wrath. (Schreiner)**

So God acts in perfect accordance with his wrath and mercy.
Both attributes glorify who He is.

24-29 In His free dispensing of mercy, God has chosen to include the Gentiles into his plan; the very thing He foretold in the Scripture. (24-29)

He foretold the inclusion of the Gentiles and the exclusion of Israel except for a remnant.

Again, God's word has not failed!

- God has called both Jew and Gentile to himself out of his free grace and mercy.
- If anyone is saved, it's on the basis of his grace; not their ethnicity.
- What matters is grace, not race.

25-26: Two texts in Hosea to support God's inclusion of the Gentiles

- Hosea 2:23 – in verse 25
- Hosea 1:10a – in verse 26
- The promise in Hosea's day was directed to the northern tribes, but Paul applies it to the Gentiles.
- By God's gracious call, they were transferred from **"not my people" "not my loved one"** to the status of **"my people" "beloved"** and **"sons of the Living God."**
- Just let that land on you – **"my people," "beloved," "sons of the living God."**

You can hear **adoption** language here.

- Election is a warm doctrine; it's a familial doctrine.
- "In love he predestined us for adoption as sons" (Eph 1:4-5)
- The doctrine of election is usually discussed in the context of **worship** and **suffering** (as a means of comfort).
- That's what these verses should cause us to do – **worship**, and rest in God's sovereignty.
- It should also make us **humble**, not haughty.
- For if we are Christians, it's not because of anything we've done or who we are, but because of God's sovereign grace.

27-29: Two texts from Isaiah, to explain the inclusion of a Jewish remnant.

- Isaiah 10:22-23 – in verses **27-28** (a great remnant text in the OT)
- The remnant involved a word of **judgment and hope**.
- Isaiah 1:9 – **in verse 29**.
 - God is determined to preserve descendants for Israel – this is a positive word.
 - Ultimately, the Messiah would come through this remnant.
 - This final word anticipates the hope that we be further developed in chapter 11.

Applications: (with some quotes from the Spurge, who is a good model for us)

1. **Share Paul's burden.** Are you broken hearted for those who are apart from Christ?
 - **"The ambassadors of peace should not cease to weep bitterly until sinners weep for their sins."** (Spurgeon)
 - It shows up again in chapter **10:1**.
 - To be like Paul means to not only have a high view of God's sovereignty; it also means being burdened for unbelievers.

2. **Never doubt God's faithfulness!** His Word never fails!
 - Isaiah 55 - His Word does not return void!
 - 1 Kings 8:56, "Not one word has failed of all his good promise"
3. **Embrace the mystery: sovereignty/responsibility.**
 - God is in control. And you are accountable. You must believe.
 - This is a great mystery.
 - Spurgeon put it well, "We don't have to reconcile friends."
 - **"I would sooner bring one sinner to Jesus Christ than unravel all the mysteries of the divine Word, for salvation is the one thing we are to live for." (Spurgeon)**
4. **Rest in God's sovereignty as you live a life of faith.**
 - Because God is sovereign, you don't have to freak out; you can share the gospel with your friends, live out your faith in the midst of opposition, go to the nations with confidence, etc.
 - **It was Romans 9 that led 34 year-old professor, John Piper, to the pastorate, when writing a book on this one chapter (Rom 9), the Lord said to him in effect, "I will not simply be analyzed, I will be adored. I will not simply be pondered, I will be proclaimed. My sovereignty is not simply to be scrutinized, it is to be heralded."**
 - **Bird: "If you loose yourself in the text of Romans 9, you might find yourself driven to doing amazing and even risky things for the sake of the glory of the "only wise God to whom be glory forever through Jesus Christ.... If you want to live big for God, you have to have a big picture of God."**
5. **Bow down before God's majesty.** This is where it's all headed in **11:33-36**.
 - **This God is worthy of our devotion and our worship.**
 - **Put away earthly trinkets, and marvel at the majesty and wisdom of God here.**
6. **Never get over the wonder of God's saving mercy and grace.**
 - **May the Lord fill you with joy and gratitude....**
 - **Lack of gratitude leads to all manner of sin - *envy, critical spirit, greed*; it turns you *inward*, not Godward, and not toward others.**
 - **Romans 1 - "they did not honor God nor give thanks to Him"**
 - **May his mercy and sovereign grace break you of ingratitude, and cause you to praise Him from the depths of your soul...**

Chosen not for good in me, Wakened up from wrath to flee,
 Hidden in the Savior's side, By the Spirit sanctified,
 Teach me, Lord, on earth to show, By my love, how much I owe.

-- Robert Murray M'Cheyne