

God's Unstoppable Mercy

Thomas Robinson, *God's Amazing Paths 1*, September 18, 2016

Romans 9:1-18

¹ I am speaking the truth in the Messiah; I am not lying, as my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, ² that **I have great sorrow** and unceasing pain in my heart. ³ For I myself would wish to be **anathema** from the Messiah for the sake of my brothers and sisters, my relatives in flesh and blood. ⁴ They are **Israelites**, and theirs are the **sonship**, the **glory**, the covenants, the giving of the **law**, the worship, and the **promises**. ⁵ Theirs are the **ancestors**, and from them, with regard to flesh, came **the Messiah**, who is **God over all people**, blessed forever. Amen.

⁶ **But it is certainly not that the word of God has failed.** For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all children of Abraham are his "seed," but

"in Isaac your seed will be called." [Gen 21:12]

⁸ This means that it is not the **children of the flesh** who are the **children of God**, but the **children of the promise** are counted as "**seed**." ⁹ For this is **the word of promise**:

"About this time next year" I will return, "and Sarah will have a son." [Gen 18:10, 14]

¹⁰ And that is not all; remember when **Rebekah** conceived twins by one man, our ancestor **Isaac**. ¹¹ Before they were born or had done anything good or bad, something happened so that **God's purpose** in making his choice would continue not from their works but from **himself as the one who calls**. ¹² She was told,

"the older will serve the younger." [Gen 25:23]

¹³ As scripture says,

"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." [Mal 1:2-3]

¹⁴ **So what do we say? Is there injustice on God's part?** Certainly not! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses,

*"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* [Exod 33:19]

¹⁶ So then it is not a matter of a person desiring God or running after him, but rather of God reaching out in mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says in the case of **Pharaoh**,

*"For this very purpose I have raised you, that I might show forth my power in you,
and that my name might be proclaimed in **all the earth**."* [Exod 9:16]

¹⁸ So then according to his purpose he has mercy on one, and according to his purpose he hardens another.

Romans 11:33, 36

³³ Oh, depth of God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How unsearchable are his judgments and how untrackable his paths! ... ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Luke 19:41-42 Jesus approaches Jerusalem

⁴¹ And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

Genesis 12:2-3 God's Promise to Abraham

² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Paul's Joy and Grief in Telling about Jesus

Paul in Romans 9-11 takes up the message he celebrated in Rm 1-8 but with a new focus and intensity. The section begins in cries of grief and ends in exclamations of wonder (11:33-36). He continues his focus on God's faithfulness to his promises (God's righteousness) that leads to salvation for both Jews and non-Jews in God's people.

Paul's grief flows from the repeated experience of proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah of Israel in synagogues in many Greek cities. Some Jews were convinced, but many refused to follow a crucified teacher and make the leap into a community that was not ethnically defined and without clear boundaries of legal practice to separate it from pagan society.

Paul understood well why Jews rejected Jesus as Messiah. He had been there. The fact that Jewish communities split when Gentiles came in seemed a veto on the Gospel. But Paul had seen that crucified Messiah and was called to preach to Gentiles. Both must be included. As he experienced the power of the Gospel to unite Jew & Gentile, Greek & non-Greek, slave & free, men & women under one gracious God over all, he grieved for rejecters. He felt like Moses after the Golden Calf (Exod 32-33); he would give himself to save his people.

Proclaiming Jesus was in no sense a new religion. Every part was rooted deep in the history of Israel in scripture. All Paul had celebrated in Rom 8 made no sense except in that story. Jesus was a Jew, descendant of David (1:3), Israel's Messiah. But that Messiah, suffering (crucified) servant, turned out to be the "*arm of the Lord*" (Is 53:1), the one God over all people, bringing blessing to all peoples as he promised to Abraham at the very start. No, Jesus did not fit what Jews like Paul had desired in a Messiah, but he fit the promise.

Learning to See God's Path of Promise and Mercy

Paul is writing to Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome who know scripture. He quotes texts and alludes to many more as he shows them the path of God's work up to the Messiah.

Most fundamental is the realization that God's people (Abraham's seed) are not defined by ethnic descent but by God's promise and choices: Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau.

Always God chooses a path of promise and mercy, often not fitting human expectation.

The people are never marked out by their virtue, but chosen by mercy in spite of their failings. God's promise & aim is to deal with the sin & brokenness of all humanity, a purpose of grace & mercy. But sin plays a dominant role in Israel's story from Sinai to exile and more.

A principal question in scripture story, worship, & prophecy is "How did things go so wrong?" Israel plays out every aspect of human sin under the defining of covenant law. But that sin doesn't stop God from shaping a people and story through which he can intervene in the person of a suffering Messiah. Everyone, even Pharaoh plays a role in God's mercy.

The Unfolding of God's Mercy for All People

But Paul knew how difficult the problem was for Jews like himself. Under an empire and society in which Jews were always outsiders, without power, a strange superstition, there were great advantages in keeping ethnic identity strong and communities clearly defined. That divided society understood such things. Everywhere, groups struggled for identity.

Paul says yes, that definition is important, but God's story leads to a Messiah embodying the God of all people, who thus reaches back to the original promise God has always been fulfilling. God works in Israel to deal with the deepest problems of humanity and to open both Jews and Gentiles, people of all kinds, to his life-giving grace and mercy.