

#28 One Gospel One Body — “Two Children,” Part 2 (2017.08.13)

Please turn with me to Romans 9, Pg. 956. We are going to be beginning with verse 19.

As you turn there, let me remind you that you will most definitely run into trouble if you read Romans 9 in isolation because it is a rhetorical argument that Paul has written as a rebuttal to the charge that God’s Word, meaning God’s promises to Israel, have failed. The argument spans Romans 9-11. So, we must honour the original context and make sure we take all of Romans 9-11 into account as we look at the various parts of Paul’s case.

Now, the reason I bring this up is because, in isolation, Romans 9 has been interpreted to be saying some things about God and His dealing with humanity that I don’t believe are scriptural. More to the point, I don’t believe they portray the character of God as He has revealed Himself. I will try to point out what I mean by this as we go through the passage today, but please don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying that anyone who has a different view of Romans 9 is purposely trying to slight or diminish, in any way, the character of God. Quite the opposite is true! Their intentions are to lift high the honour and authority of God, as our Creator, and to give proper emphasis to His sovereign will.

Now, a key point of Calvinistic theology that is taken from Romans 9 is that God chooses some to be saved and others to be condemned. No one has free will, God choice is the only factor has any relevance in this equation. Now, that sounds harsh, but those who hold this perspective would say that we all deserve condemnation because of our rebellion and sin, so the fact that God chooses to save some points to His mercy and grace. That is very true. Paul has said, “...*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” (**Romans 3:23**). We have all sinned. We all deserve God’s wrath, so the fact that any are saved is a testimony to the gracious mercy of God, absolutely. But, the question remains, does Romans 9, or Scripture in general, teach us that God created some to be saved and that He created others to be condemned?

Perhaps a better question might be, Does God expect us to be responsible for our actions and to make right choices, not only in regard to living a moral life, but more specifically in placing our trust in Him through faith in Jesus Christ?

Those who view this text from a Calvinist perspective would say that it teaches that people who choose Christ are those who God determined would choose Christ. Again, there is no free will, just God's sovereign will. But, what do we do with the idea that God has actually created people for the sole purpose of condemning them? Do we just accept it? Well we should if that is what Scripture teaches, but given the seriousness of the question and its implications, we need to be very careful to make sure that this, is in fact, what Scripture teaches.

You'll remember the key verse in Romans 9 is verse 6: *"It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."* (**Romans 9:6**)

Now, the point could be made that what Paul is saying here is that God never made the promise to all of Israel, or that God never chose all of Israel. That is true. OK, well then, doesn't that mean that this passage does teach that it is God who chooses and therefore He chooses some to be saved and some to be condemned?

Well, it depends on what exactly we are referring to when we talk about God's choosing. If we are talking about salvation then we still have a problem, because God's promises to Israel have still failed. Most will not receive their promised salvation. But, if we are talking about God choosing Israel as the means by which He would bring salvation, then we have no problem whatsoever because God's promises have been fulfilled—Israel was the means by which salvation came into the world through Christ.

Christ is the fulfillment of all of Israel's promises and God was faithful to Israel because He continued to use them, as He had promised, to be the means by which Abraham would be a blessing to all the nations.

OK, but what about salvation? Well, I don't believe that Paul is speaking about salvation for the majority of chapter 9. He is speaking about God choosing Israel as a nation for His purpose to bring forth salvation for all who would believe, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile (Rom 1:16). And this is where the idea of not all of Israel being Israel comes in. There is the Israel that God used to bring forth His purpose and plan in Christ and there is the subset of Israel, the real Israel, the true Israel, that will be saved because they understand that they are saved by grace through faith.

Now, if you were here last week, I pointed out that all of the Old Testament quotes that Paul used in making his point that God can choose whomever He will to ensure that His purposes move forward, had an undercurrent that spoke directly to the fact that, although God continued to use Israel, the majority of Israel were rebellious and unbelieving. That is the overall message of Paul quoting from Malachi 1 in verse 13, and of him quoting from Exodus 33:19 in verse 15. In both cases, we see Israel's rebellion, and in the case of Malachi, Israel questions God's love in the midst of their rebellion.

In this we see a situation that parallels the circumstances of Israel that Paul was addressing. Then we had Paul pointing to God's use of Pharaoh to bring forth his plan. Once again, God's plan moves forward, even in the midst of rebellion, in fact God uses the rebellion to further His purposes. So, whether the rebellion comes from the nation of Israel in general, or Pharaoh in particular, God's plan will not be denied. God's love demands that it must go forward. God's mercy must be made manifest.

As Paul explains in verse 16, *"It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."* (**Romans 9:16**). The fact that God is able to bring forth the Promised Messiah, Abraham's blessing to the nations, through Israel, had nothing to do with Israel, because they were rebellious for the most part. They neither desired or worked toward God's plan, but still God's mercy won out.

Then we looked at the question that Paul raises from an imaginary representative of Israel. In verse 19, he writes: *One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" (Romans 9:19)*. Clearly Paul understand how his argument has sounded thus far and he brings this question forward to deal with a possible misconception.

But, let me ask you, is this question completely wrong? Well, the attitude is wrong and the conclusion is wrong, but there is truth here. Let's unpack this for a moment. Paul, thus far, has proven both that no one can resist God's will, and that everyone can resist His will. Before you think I finally lost it, let me explain.

Can we resist God's will? Well, let me ask you a question: What is sin? Is it not, in its essence, resisting God's will? If it is not, then what is it? And isn't this the point of what Paul has been talking about? God has used Israel even though they have been in rebellion to His will. Yes, that is exactly what Paul has been saying and now we have answered the question. We can resist His perceptive will. In other words, we can disobey His commandments, we can ignore His Law, or Word, we can even disregard His desire for us, but it is also true that we can't disobey His purposive will. In other words, we can't disobey His purposes, even if we are disobeying His commands, even if we are in rebellion. Again, is that not what we have seen throughout this chapter? The majority of Israel has rebelled, but God has still used them to bring forth His purpose. From Israel came, Jesus, the Promised Messiah.

The world is full of sin. The culture is clearly moving further and further away from the will of God. We call His Word, antiquated and outdated. We take what God has defined and we redefine it. Does any of this mean the demise of God's plan or purpose? Does our rebellion and sin mean that the world wins and God loses?

Did God send a memo to close all the churches. Did He give Jesus a severance package stating, "Sorry, plans have changed, you don't need to return"? No! That's not the way it works.

Regardless of our rebellion, God's will, when it comes to His purposive will, when it comes to what He intends to do, when it comes to what He has planned since before the creation of the world, that will, cannot be resisted. Or perhaps a better way to put it is, we may resist it, but it's still going to happen. Nothing will stop it. Are you with me here?

But, there is a problem in this question. There is a misunderstanding that Paul is underlining and the misunderstanding is this—the objector has equated God's purposive will to Israel's salvation. The objection to God is, "You have made me this way. You have made me so that I do not believe, so I am not responsible. Don't blame me!"

To that Paul says, "Wait a minute. God chose you to bring forth His purposes, He did not condemn you to a state of unbelief. Your unbelief is on you!"

This is the point of Romans 9. This is why there are two Israels. There is the nation, most of which remain in rebellion, even though they were used by God, and there is the "True Israel," or "Spiritual Israel," or the "Remnant" as Paul will point out in a few verses, who are those individuals who have a righteousness that is by faith.

Picking things up in verse 20, *But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"* ²¹ *Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?* ²² *What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath--prepared for destruction?* ²³ *What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—(Romans 9:20-23)*

Paul raised this question of "*Why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?*", because he knew this is a conclusion that some of his audience might take from his argument, and because He wanted to make it clear that this is not what he is saying.

In verse 20-21 he deals with the attitude of the question. It is arrogant and presumptuous. It is a rebellious attitude.

Now, notice that both pieces of pottery are made from the same lump of clay. Some is used for “noble” or “honourable” purposes and others are molded into “common” or literally, “dishonourable” purposes.

The question becomes, to whom is Paul referring with the phrase, “the same lump of clay.” Those of the Calvinist perspective usually conclude, “the human race.” And they would interpret Paul’s words as saying, “God takes all of humanity and decides whether they are going to be “noble” or, using the terminology from verse 23, “objects of mercy” and He also makes some to be “common” or, using the terminology of verse 22, “objects of wrath”. Thus, God created some humans on which He will have mercy and He created others for no other purpose than of being “objects of wrath.” God creates some people to go to heaven and He creates others to go to hell.

But the question I have is, does this interpretation fit the context? What has Paul been talking about? Well, Paul’s argument is to disprove the idea that God’s promises to Israel have failed. And the key point of the chapter is that not all of Israel are Israel. Or to put it another way, there are two Israels. So, why, then, would the clay refer to all of humanity and not the two Israels?

The larger Israel of rebellion and unbelief, fits well with the “common” pottery, or the “objects of wrath” and the “True Israel,” Believing Israel, the Israel that is saved by faith, well, they are the “noble” pottery, or “the objects of mercy.”

Throughout Romans 9, Paul has been speaking of Israel in particular, not mankind in general, so we need to be careful about making general statements about mankind when the context is limited to God’s dealing with Israel.

OK, so what is Paul saying then? Paul is simply saying what we have already said. God has used Israel to bring forth His plan of Salvation. He was faithful to Israel until Jesus, the Promised One, the One who fulfils both the law and the prophets, was delivered into this world. He used both believing Israel and unbelieving Israel. He worked through their faith and their rebellion. But here is where we move from talking about God's purposive will in using Israel in history to Paul talking about Israel as individuals, in the context of salvation.

Remember that God's perceptive will can be ignored, rejected or mocked. So, we have an Israel, that cannot resist God's purpose for them as a nation in bringing forth the promise of salvation, but we also have an Israel full of individuals who can ignore and reject God's desire for them to accept that salvation.

This is what we are talking about now. God uses Israel as a nation for His purposes, but in that nation, are individuals that make up two groups, the larger is a group from Israel who refuse to place their trust in the very plan God used them to make a reality, and therefore, they are objects of wrath. And we have a group from Israel who have placed their faith in Christ and become objects of mercy.

Now, how can I be sure that this is in fact what Paul is talking about? Well, I think the context is clear that we are talking about the two groups that make up the nation of Israel, but is there anything else?

Let's focus on verses 22-23: *What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath--prepared for destruction?*
²³ *What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—(Romans 9:20-23)*

Now you might think, at first glance, that both of these groups are what they are because of God's choice, but let's dig a bit deeper. Notice the phrase at the end of verse 23, "whom he prepared in advance for glory." This makes us think of Roman 8:28-30 right? Those

He foreknew, He predestined, etc, etc. Those He knew would chose to place their faith in Christ, He predestined and justified and glorified. What is interesting is that this phrase is missing from verse 22. If we are dealing with two groups from Israel that God has chosen to either be “objects of wrath” or “objects of mercy,” you would expect that phrase, “whom he prepared in advance” to be connected to both groups, but it isn’t. And you would also expect both verbs, or in this case, participles to be equal as well, but again they aren’t. In verse 23 the verb is active and clearly God is the One who is active, but in verse 22, it isn’t so clear.

In verse 22, the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction is either passive or middle in voice, since both are identical in spelling, and you have to use context to decide which it is.

If it is passive, Paul is saying, “objects of his wrath—that were prepared for destruction. If it is middle, Paul would be saying, “objects of wrath—who prepared themselves for destruction.” That is kind of a big difference, don’t you think?

So, what does the context tell us? Well, all through Romans 9, Paul has been using the Old Testament to point out Israel’s rebellion, and more to the point, in this very image of the potter and the clay, both in Isaiah and Jeremiah, the context is the same. It is Yahweh warning Israel to repent. Let me remind you of what it says in Jeremiah: *Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel....¹¹ "Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.'¹² But they will reply, 'It's no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.'"* **(Jeremiah 18:5-6, 11-12)**

Clearly the context points to the middle voice, particularly when you also recognized that the objects of wrath are not identified as being prepared beforehand for destruction. God didn't prepare them for destruction. They prepared themselves! How did they prepare themselves? Through their rebellion and unbelief. Specifically, because they continued with their own plans of believing they could save themselves.

There is one other thing I want to point out from verses 22 and 23.

The Greek here can either be mean, (1) *Because* God was willing to show his wrath and make his power known, *therefore* he bore with great patience the objects of his wrath"; or, (2) *Although* he wanted to show his wrath and make his power known, *nevertheless* he bore with great patience the objects of his wrath." The NIV follows the first example and the NASB follows the second example.

OK, but what exactly is the difference? Well in the first example, God holds back His wrath so that it will build and build and build until it explodes in the most terrifying pyrotechnics ever seen. It will make my BBQing skills seem lame. And the purpose of that build up is to show the objects of mercy how gracious He really is by showing them the utter terror of what they escaped. This is the standard perspective of many Calvinists.

Calvin himself says that "the Lord bears patiently for a time with these, not destroying them at the first moment, but deferring the judgment prepared for them, and this in order to set forth the decisions of his severity, that others may be terrified by so dreadful examples." And John Stott says, "His forbearance in delaying the hour of judgment" is designed to "make the ultimate outpouring of his wrath the more dreadful." Finally, in John Piper's words, "God sustains and tolerates vessels of wrath" so that his "sovereign power and terrible wrath can be demonstrated even more vividly"

I strongly disagree with this interpretation. I believe Paul is saying, *"What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much*

patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? ²³ *And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.”* **(Romans 9:22-23, NASB)**

The idea here is that Israel’s disobedience and rebellion makes God want to respond according to His Holy justice, but he refuses to do that, why? Because He isn’t motivated by wrath: He is motivated by mercy. This whole chapter is about how God has endured Israel’s rebellion so that His purpose for Israel would be fulfilled. Yahweh put up with Israel’s rebellion so that Christ, the bearer of salvation would come and be the instrument of mercy for anyone who would believe. That’s what Paul is talking about in this passage. And to reinforce the idea that we are on the right track, we have the word “patience” here. Paul says that Yahweh “endures with much patience.” Whenever we are dealing with God’s patience, we are dealing with His mercy; not His wrath.

The purpose of God’s patience in verse 22 was to give those who prepared themselves by unbelief for God’s wrath a time to repent, so that they might become objects of mercy. Remember, the objects of wrath have made themselves objects of wrath by their unbelief. God didn’t create them as that category of human that He desires to display His wrath on. So there is nothing stopping the “objects of wrath” from becoming “objects of mercy,” other than their own choice to believe.

As the Apostle Peter reminds us, *“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* **(2 Peter 3:9)** That’s why God is patient! To suggest that God is patient to build up His wrath and be even more terrifying and devastating just to show off His power, doesn’t fit the character of God we see in Scripture, particularly in His dealings with Israel.

Moving on, what Paul does in verses 24-29 does nothing to further his argument. He is just quoting more Old Testament texts to support His argument that God's Word, God's promises to Israel have not failed.

In verse 24, Paul finishes his thought on the identity of the objects of mercy. Who exactly are they? Paul says they are *"even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?"*

For the first time, since he started chapter 9, he mentions the Gentiles. Don't let this thought escape you. Paul's point is that the smaller group of Israel, that isn't just ethnic Israel, but "Believing Israel," or "True Israel," and who are "objects of mercy" because they have placed their faith in Christ, also include the Gentiles. Surprise! Paul is talking about the Church here, obviously.

And to back up his claim he quotes from Hosea: *"I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one,"* ²⁶ and, *"It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"*

Now, in the original context of Hosea, God is talking to the northern kingdom. He is speaking to the ten tribes that were taken into captivity by the Assyrians, and because of their rebellion, they have been taken away and God no longer calls them, "my people." But the promise is that, once again, they would become His people, in the very place where it was said "You are not my people." Where is that? Among the nations.

Sometimes we call the northern kingdom, or the Ten tribes the lost tribes, but they weren't lost, they were spread out and became part of the nations and because of that, the now represent more than the ten tribes, they represent all the peoples they are part of as well, and so Paul, is pointing out that this prophecy in Hosea extends beyond it's original audience to include anyone who comes to Yahweh through faith in Jesus Christ. In this way,

we see that the Church has always been part of God's plan. And that once again, God's punishment, God's judgement, was to bring about a greater opportunity for mercy through fulfilling His promises to Israel—through the sending of Jesus.

Moving on, Paul quotes a couple of passages from Isaiah. Starting in verse 27 he writes: *Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. ²⁸ For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality." ²⁹ It is just as Isaiah said previously: "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah."*

(Romans 9:27-29)

Once again, Paul brings home, the fate of Israel. Using Isaiah, he points back to the promise God made to Abraham, "though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea," God made good on His promise. They were indeed numerous, but, not all of Israel is Israel. Only a remnant will be saved. Only the believing part of Israel will be saved by their faith. Paul's point in bringing this up is to simply say that God has always known that only a remnant would be saved. The fact that the majority of Israel has not placed their faith in Christ did not take God by surprise. It is consistent with being patient with a nation in which the majority trusted in themselves more than in the mercy of God.

Now, again, you might see this as an image of God's judgement. And it is. Unbelieving Israel will be judged by the very same standards as anyone and everyone who hasn't trusted in Christ, this has always been the case. There is only one way to receive God's mercy and it is by grace through faith in Christ.

God hasn't changed gears, His purpose has always been to bring Jesus and His sacrificial death in our place, into the pages of History as the means by which all people must be saved. But, instead of getting stuck on His judgement of unbelieving Israel, look at what Paul is really saying through Isaiah.

This may be a picture of judgement, but it is equally a picture of God's mercy, *"Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah."* Paul is saying that Israel would have been completely destroyed. Israel would have been nothing more than a forgotten people, if the Lord hadn't left us descendants. The idea here is that God preserved a remnant.

There is one more thing I want to point out before we close. With the beginning of verse 30, we really begin a new section that carries through to the end of chapter 10, and it is here that Paul is finally answering the question first posed in verse 19. *One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"*

To that Paul answers: ³⁰ *What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith;* ³¹ *but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it.* ³² *Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone."* ³³ *As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."* **(Romans 9:30-33)**

Don't miss the point here. Paul is explaining something very important. First, he says that the Gentiles obtained righteousness that is by faith. This is the righteousness provided by God through faith.

OK but why did Israel not obtain righteousness? It was because of the way they pursued it, they didn't pursue it by faith, instead they pursued it by their own efforts. Do you see what Paul is saying? In verse 32, he is saying they could have kept the law of righteousness, if they had done it by faith. How can that be? Because the point of the Law was to show them they were sinners in need of God's mercy. The entire sacrificial system was designed to extend mercy and ultimately point to the sacrifice of Christ that would provide the once and for all, real sacrifice by which all of God's people will be declared righteous.

And more to the point, there has always been a part of Israel, throughout all the generations, up to the point of Paul, that understood they are saved not by their own efforts at keeping the Law, but by their cries for mercy to the God who gave the Law.

So, the question to verse 19 is now fully answered. All of Israel could have been objects of mercy, if they had understood that the law was never intended to be the means of saving them. It was intended to point out to them their need for God's mercy, because the Law showed them they were sinners.

We see these two groups of Israel in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18. You remember the story: both men go to the temple. The Pharisee was busy thanking God that he wasn't a sinner like the tax collector and then he gave God his resume of righteousness. But, the tax collector, couldn't even look up as he prayed. He simply cried out for mercy because of his deep understanding that he was a sinner. Jesus tells us that it was the Tax Collector, and not the Pharisee that walked away justified. Why? Because He understood that all that God has ever wanted was for us to recognize our sin and to humbly come before Him crying out to Him to be the solution for our sin.

Paul ends with a combined quote from two places in Isaiah about the stumbling stone. In the original context it points to Yahweh, but in the New Testament, it is used to point to Christ. In fact, Jesus Himself quotes it to refer to himself in Matthew 21.

Here is the point of all this: Jesus' coming was not something new. It was something planned from before the creation of the world. And Jesus' coming was not a new way for God to deal with people and their sin. It was always the only way for God to deal with people and their sin. And it isn't that Israel was rejected or forgotten. There were always those who understood that the purpose of the Law was for Israel to place their faith in the mercy of God. That mercy has always been extended because Christ was the promised of salvation to come and God made it happen by using Israel.

This salvation is only obtained by crying out for the mercy of God. It is only in our understanding that we are sinners, guilty before God, deserving His wrath, but knowing that He is patient and kind and merciful to those who cry out to Him. This is what Yahweh promised would happen when He called Israel. This is what Yahweh made happen through Israel. This is what is available to the Jews first and also to the Gentiles because Yahweh always keeps His promises.