

10. Children of the Promise (4Q 2017—Salvation by Faith Alone—Book of Romans)

Biblical material: *Romans 9*

Quotes

- No creature that deserved redemption would need to be redeemed. *C.S. Lewis*
- As a race we are not even stray sheep, or wandering prodigals merely, we are rebels with weapons in our hands. Our supreme need from God, therefore, is not the education of our conscience... but our redemption. *P.T. Forsyth*
- God's plan and purpose of salvation is like himself, it is eternal. *Eric Alexander*

Questions

Why draw a distinction between Jews and Gentiles? What is the point of this argument? How does “being called” really work? In what way did Israel have an advantage? What does this passage say about God and his foreknowledge? What are the dangers in attributing to God all decisions? How does this relate to the great controversy?

Bible discussion

Romans 9 makes clear God's calling of Israel to be his special people, but then explains their eventual failure. They are identified as being special not because of who they are inherently, but because they are the recipients of God's grace through the law and covenants etc (9:1-5). Despite their failure, they too are called to Christ. Paul also emphasizes that it is God's plan and promise that makes “children of God” (9:6-8).

Much has been made of this chapter in terms of predestination and God's choosing rather than human performance. However this is not to say that God has *made* us that way, as if we have no choice. In describing what will happen, God is not saying that this is predetermined in a fatalistic way. The illustration of Pharaoh's heart being hardened is significant (9:17, 18) since back in Exodus 9 God is said to have hardened Pharaoh's heart, that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and that Pharaoh's heart was hardened. Consequently it should not be assumed that God is specifically making Pharaoh hard-hearted in a deterministic sense.

The central part of this discussion reveals the heart of the great controversy:

“So God is merciful to those he wishes to be, and hardens the hearts of those he wants to. Now you'll argue with me and ask, “So why does he still blame us then? Who can go against what God wants?” No, for who are you—a mere mortal—to contradict God? Can something that is created say to its creator, “Why did you make me like this?” Doesn't a potter have the right to use the same batch of clay to make both a pretty vase and an ordinary pot?

“It's as if God, wanting to demonstrate the violent conflict and to reveal his power, patiently endured these “pots destined for destruction,” so that he might reveal the wealth of his glory through these “pots of mercy” which he has prepared for glory. That's who we are—those he's called, not just from among the Jews, but from among the foreigners too...” (9:18-24 FBV).

The conclusion (9:30-32) is that we are made right with God only by trusting in him, and that the foreigners (Gentiles) did this, while the Jews tried to be made right with God by their law-keeping.

Comment

The challenge in Romans 9 is to avoid the conclusion that God has planned everything out—including who will be saved and who won't—and yet still maintain his sovereignty. The illustration of Pharaoh is significant, since the Bible speaks of his hardening heart in three ways—that it was his decision, that it was done by God, and then simply passively—"it was hardened." This reveals something of what is going on. While we do indeed have freedom of choice, God still retains overall control—and he is even credited for our bad choices too!

Romans 9:22 is also intriguing. Literally it speaks of God "showing the anger." But this means more than some kind of vindictive display—it surely is showing what happens to all those who go their own way. He's specifically dealing with these "pots destined for destruction," and being incredibly patient with them. This indicates that God is working through the whole of the great controversy to demonstrate in great detail what happens to those who choose their own sinful way. This is not the extrinsic and punitive destruction of sinners, but allowing them to reveal who they really are, and sadly also allowing sin to do what sin does—completely and utterly destroy. For it's sin paying the wage of death, not God.

The sad end to the chapter is the conclusion that the "foreigners" who weren't even looking to be made right with God accepted his gift of salvation, while Israel went on with their law-based system that they thought would make them right in God's eyes, but did not. Jesus was a stumbling-block, an offence, to them during his life, and remains such to those who seek to achieve salvation by their own efforts. In the same way that Jesus rejected this "righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees," so too we must reject any attempts to make ourselves right before God by our own exertions. Paul elsewhere balances this with an affirmation that this is not a question of doing nothing as a result, but any tinge of self-righteousness is truly deadly!

Ellen White Comments

There was no arbitrary choice on the part of God by which Esau was shut out from the blessings of salvation. The gifts of His grace through Christ are free to all. There is no election but one's own by which any may perish. God has set forth in His word the conditions upon which every soul will be elected to eternal life--obedience to His commandments, through faith in Christ. God has elected a character in harmony with His law, and anyone who shall reach the standard of His requirement will have an entrance into the kingdom of glory... As regards man's final salvation, this is the only election brought to view in the word of God. {PP 207-8}

...the king's heart had become hardened by persistent rebellion... Still the king was obstinate... Still the heart of Pharaoh grew harder... There was no exercise of supernatural power to harden the heart of the king. God gave to Pharaoh the most striking evidence of divine power, but the monarch stubbornly refused to heed the light. Every display of infinite power rejected by him, rendered him the more determined in his rebellion. The seeds of rebellion that he sowed when he rejected the first miracle produced their harvest. As he continued to venture on in his own course, going from one degree of stubbornness to another, his heart became more and more hardened, until he was called to look upon the cold, dead faces of the first-born. {PP 267-8}