**Romans 9**

Introduction

A. What is Romans 9-11 about?

1. The historical reality Paul is addressing = the vast majority of ethnic Jews were rejecting the gospel at that time and were therefore missing out on salvation

2. This reality brings up a huge theological issue = it calls into question God’s faithfulness to his people (v. 6: “has God’s word failed?”)

3. So Romans 9-11 is a defense of God’s faithfulness to his Word and his people

B. See 9:1-5

1. Notice how personal and emotional this is for Paul (v. 2-3)

2. Notice how the Jews should be accepting the gospel of all people in light of their history (v. 4-5)

C. Why has Israel rejected the Messiah?

1. In Chapter 9 the answer is: they have rejected the messiah because this was part of God’s sovereign plan

2. In Chapter 10 the answer is: they have rejected the messiah because it’s their fault and in their own stubbornness and pride, they refuse to receive their messiah

D. The age old issue: the interplay between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility

1. God’s Sovereignty = He is in control of every detail of the universe, and everything is working according to his plan

2. Human Responsibility = we make real decisions in this life for which we will be held responsible and accountable

3. Scripture never gives us a complete philosophical explanation for how these can both be true, but it consistently affirms both (see Philippians 2:12-13)

4. Tim Keller: “God’s sovereign plan is not just fulfilled in spite of our choices; it’s fulfilled through our choices.”

E. Chapter 9 is especially about the doctrine of election

Election means that God is even sovereign over who is saved. In his sovereign freedom, he chooses who will receive salvation.

The Passage

I. Paul’s main argument: A defense of God’s faithfulness (v. 6-13)

A. The key point (v. 6-7a)

1. Paul’s point = it’s never been the case that every ethnic Jew is part of God’s true spiritual family. Within larger group of ethnic Jews, there has always been a smaller remnant that is the true people of God whose hearts have been changed by God, so that they are living in a saving relationship.

2. So in Paul’s day God is still being faithful to his word (to preserve a remnant) and that is consistent with how he’s always worked

3. NT Wright: “What counts is grace not race.” Physical descent was not the ultimate criterion. It has always been by God’s grace, and he has the freedom to call certain people according to his own grace

B. Two examples of this

1. Isaac and Ishmael (v. 7b-9)

a. God promises a miracle child to Abraham and Isaac. When that promise was slow in coming they took matters into their own hands which produced Ishmael. But God was faithful to his promise in giving them Isaac and chose to fulfill his covenant through Isaac

b. So both Isaac and Ishmael where children of Abraham, yet God chose Isaac over Ishmael

2. Jacob and Esau (v. 10-13)

a. Jacob and Esau had the same father and mother, they were twins, there was nothing to distinguish them, yet while in the womb God chose Jacob over Esau

b. He did it to highlight his prerogative and freedom to choose whomever he wants

c. “Jacob I loved, Esau I hated” is biblical language not to describe God’s feelings about the two children but simply his choice of Jacob (just as Jesus says, “if you would follow me, you must hate your mother and father and brothers” = you must choose me over them)

3. These examples show that God has always chosen a remnant within the larger group of ethnic Israel and is therefore acting consistently in Paul’s day with how he has always acted and is keeping his promises to his people

4. But in defending God’s freedom to choose whomever he wants, Paul’s argument raises another issue: is God fair and just in choosing one person over another?

II. Paul’s secondary argument: a defense of God’s justice/fairness (v. 14-24)

A. Two more examples: Moses and Pharaoh

1. Moses (v. 15-16)

a. Context: After Israel sinned by worshipping the golden calf; Moses intervened and God was merciful. But his point to Moses here is that he was merciful not because the Israelites deserved mercy, but simply because God is free to be merciful to whomever he wants

b. God is never unjust to those he does not have mercy on. The truth is we all deserve his just punishment, and if God chooses to be merciful to some, that doesn’t make him unjust to the others—justice is exactly what they receive.

2. Pharaoh (v. 17-18)

a. Context: God tells Moses that he is going to harden Pharoah’s heart

b. Paul could have quoted a verse where God directly says he will harden Pharaoh’s heart but instead he quotes the verse he does in v. 17 to show that even when God does things that are hard for us, he does them because he has larger and purposes in mind

1) = that his power is displayed and his name is proclaimed

2) Just think of all the good that came from Pharaoh’s hard heart. If he hadn’t have had a hard heart, none of the amazing miracles of the Exodus story would have ever needed to occur.

3. In talking about God hardening Pharaoh this raises the question of human responsibility

B. A defense of God’s prerogative to design things the way he has

1. Paul’s defense (v. 20)

a. He doesn’t give us an explanation. Rather he defends God’s right to be God and calls us to a posture of humility before the sovereign creator

b. Kent Hughes: “Tiny man—whose life is just a breath, whose history proves over and over that despite all his learning and technological triumphs he repeatedly makes colossal errors and falls into unspeakable barbarisms—this puny man stands before the God who knows the end from the beginning, who has never learned anything because he knows everything, who is the perfection of wisdom and love—and talks back to him. How absurd!”

c. Paul is Not attacking our sincere desire to ask questions and understand. He is attacking that prideful part of us that says, “I don’t like how God runs the universe, and I could do it better”

2. Paul’s analogy: Potter and clay (v. 21-24)

a. The Potter has the absolute freedom and prerogative to design things however he wants to.

b. We need to trust that as the Creator God has larger and better purposes in mind than we can imagine

c. Paul mentions what some of these larger and better purposes might be

1) He shows his wrath and makes his power known, which gives him glory and shows him to be a great and holy God (v. 22)

2) He makes the riches of his glory know to the objects of his mercy (v. 23). When his people see the wrath and power God can exhibit, it makes them all the more grateful that he has had mercy on them in ways that they don’t deserve

Conclusion

We must acknowledge that this is a challenging passage emotionally

I. Easing the tension a bit

A. Don’t forget, this is only one side of the coin

B. Don’t forget, this is only one image of God (Potter)

1. There are other warmer images such as Father, Shepherd, Sanctuary

2. The clearest image of God is seen in Jesus Christ, and there we see a God who is sovereign but also full of mercy, love, and compassion

C. Remember, we all deserve punishment and, left to ourselves, every one of us would choose independence from God and rebellion against God. So we need to get rid of the image of someone saying, “God, I desperately want to know you and surrender my life to you,” and God saying, “Sorry, you’re not chosen.” That person does not exist.

II. Leaving the tension there

A. We need to live with humility before the sovereign God.

1. We need to give him the freedom to be God as he wants to be, rather than trying to make him into a God that fits our sensibilities

2. Tim Keller: “We need to allow God to offend us from time to time.”

B. In this passage, Paul let God speak for himself. All of his Old Testament quotations are direct quotes from the mouth of God.

C. The lesson of Job 38-42

1. Job wanted an explanation from God for his suffering

2. God didn’t give him an explanation but essentially defended his freedom and prerogative as creator to do what he wants to do

3. An encounter with God’s glory was sufficient for Job