

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN WORLD MISSION

Romans 9:1-33

Key Verse: 9:16

“It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.”

In the last passage Paul came to his glorious conclusion that we are more than conquerors through the love of Christ. We have a glorious hope in the redemption of all things, including our own bodies. We know that God is working for good in all things. Most of all, we have the assurance that God loves us because he gave his one and only Son Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. So, no matter what situation we are in, we are more than conquerors through the love of God.

In chapter 9, Paul considers the Jews. In the flow of God's history, they were the ones who should have accepted the Messiah. Some of them had done so, but on the whole they had rejected Christ. Paul, a Jewish Christian, agonized over this. But he did not think about it from a human point of view; he looked at it from God's point of view. Then he found the meaning of Israel's rejection, as well as God's sovereignty in his redemptive history. May God help us to study this passage from God's point of view and accept God's sovereignty in world mission.

First, Paul's broken shepherd heart for Israel (1-4a).

Look at verses 1-4a. “I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.” When we study Acts, we are amazed at Paul's spirit of conquest. He was always joyful and victorious. It was because he knew the love of God in Christ Jesus (Ro 8:37). This love made him strong. This love made him more than a conqueror. Even so, Paul carried in his heart great sorrow and unceasing anguish. His heart ached constantly for the salvation of his own people Israel. They had rejected Christ. So they were cursed and cut off from the love of God. Paul knew that their destiny was everlasting punishment. It was unbearable to him; he had constant agony in his soul. So he always preached the gospel to the Jews, and even risked his life to visit Jerusalem.

Paul's agony was so great that he was willing to exchange his own soul for the salvation of his people. Of course, God would not agree. We remember Moses. After the Israelites sinned against God at Sinai by making an idol in the form of a golden calf, God was angry. God was ready to destroy them (Ex 32:10). But Moses interceded for them. In his shepherd's anguish, he pleaded with God to forgive them, or otherwise, to blot him out of his book (Ex 32:32). God refused to blot Moses out. Anyway, we find a true shepherd's heart in Moses and in Paul. They loved their own people so much that they were willing to bear their punishment. They have the image of our Lord Jesus Christ (Isa 53:5).

Here we learn that those who know the love of God have a broken shepherd's heart for others. They do not cry about their own small problems, but for the salvation of others' souls. Americans must have a broken shepherd heart for their fellow Americans. It is amazing to see that many Korean missionaries have a shepherd's heart for young Americans. For example, one woman missionary went fishing at UIC. She met a student and shared the gospel with him. She pleaded with him for forty minutes to accept Christ. But in the end, he rejected the message. Then the woman missionary went into an empty classroom and cried for an hour, pleading with God to save his soul. How beautiful it is! Strangely, however, many Americans are indifferent toward the spiritual plight of their own people. May God give each of us a broken shepherd's heart for our own people, like that of St. Paul.

Second, God blessed Israel spiritually and abundantly (4b-5).

Many people like material blessings, not spiritual blessings. On Friday, we heard from Dr. Dwight Linton about the work of God in North Korea through Christian Friends of Korea. At present, the North Korean government strictly forbids any kind of gospel preaching. But they welcome material help to feed the hungry. They like material blessings, not spiritual blessings. Many people are like that. They prefer a foxy woman or a macho man. They prefer money or pleasure to spiritual things. However, when God really loves a people, he gives them spiritual blessing. God blessed Israel spiritually. Look at verses 4b-5. “Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the

covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.” Let’s consider these blessings.

The adoption as sons refers to the special relationship that Israel had with God. In Exodus 4:22, God called Israel his firstborn son. A firstborn son is so precious in a family. In him is embodied the hope for the future and the power to lead. Like a firstborn son, God wanted Israel to grow in the knowledge of God until they could be a shepherd nation for all other nations of the world.

The divine glory is God’s own presence with his people. God was with them through a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. God was with them through the temple. Knowing that God was with them was the greatest source of comfort and encouragement in any difficult period. Those who see God’s glory become strong and holy. Those who see only the things of the world become weak and petty.

The covenants refer to circumcision through Abraham and the law through Moses. Through these covenants God established a special relationship with the nation of Israel. For example, when God delivered Israel from Egypt, it was not just because they were groaning in slavery; there were many people groaning in slavery. It was because he remembered his covenant with Abraham (Ex 2:24). On the basis of his covenant, God treated Israel with special grace and favor. Many in America have claimed that our nation has a special covenant relationship with God, beginning with our Pilgrim fathers. So there are many covenant churches in America. To have God’s special favor as a nation is a great blessing indeed.

The law refers to the Ten Commandments. The law instructs us how to have a relationship with God and how to live in peace with others. The law teaches us what sin is. Only those who have the law can see the human problem as it really is. Historically, wherever the people of Israel went, their knowledge of the law of God made them a blessing to the people around them by elevating them morally and spiritually.

The temple worship was the privilege to meet God regularly and worship him. People in many societies down through history have made a great effort to worship God. But they failed because they did not know God and they did not know how to worship God. However, the people of Israel could meet God regularly and worship him. They could listen to his word and repent of their sins and restore their spirits. They could find true rest for their souls through regular worship.

The promises refer primarily to coming of the Messiah. God made specific promises to Abraham and David that the Savior would deliver his people and establish the glorious kingdom of God. These promises sustained the people of Israel during dark times. The patriarchs were men whom God called and trained to live by faith as examples to the nation. They include Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In addition there are so many other great men and women of God in Israel’s history. Their examples guided the people of Israel in the truth and the way of blessing. We are enlightened by their faith in our times as well.

Through the nation of Israel, the Christ came into the world. Paul explains that Jesus, the Christ, is God over all. Through the nation Israel, the Holy and Almighty God who created the heavens and the earth came to this world in a human form. The eternal Word of God became flesh by putting on an Israelite identity. This was the greatest privilege and blessing that any people could have.

As we have seen, God blessed the nation Israel abundantly with one spiritual blessing after another. The greatest blessing was the coming of the Christ through their nation. But when the long awaited Christ came, Israel rejected him. They despised him as the poor son of a carpenter. They were proud and unrepentant. As the parable of the tenants teaches, they grabbed God’s blessings, but totally rejected God’s sovereignty. Finally, they handed the Christ over to be crucified like a criminal. It remains the most poignant event in human history. It lead Isaiah to cry out, “Who has believed our message?” To Paul, Israel’s rejection of the Christ was too painful to endure and beyond understanding. His heart was broken for them moment by moment.

However, Paul’s realization of who Christ is was not darkened at all. He proclaims that Christ is God over all, forever praised! Christ revealed clearly that he was God in the flesh. Christ revealed it through his miracles. Christ revealed it through his absolute holiness in character and deed. Christ revealed it in his understanding of the Bible and of humanity. Most of all, Christ revealed it through his atoning death on the cross and his resurrection from the

dead. Sin and death could not keep him in the grave. Christ rose again. The tragic rejection of his own people was not the end. Christ rose again. Christ fulfilled God's purpose completely through his absolute obedience. Where Israel failed completely, Christ succeeded completely. Because of Christ, the history of Israel is not sorrowful, but most glorious.

Like Israel, the USA has been abundantly blessed by God. Sadly, we fall short of God's calling as a missionary-sending country. But we must look at Christ. Christ never fails. Christ is God over all, forever praised! In Christ we have forgiveness. In Christ we have victory. Let's look at Christ and pray to be a missionary-sending country.

Third, God's sovereignty in raising spiritual children (6-13).

God's special favor marked Israel as God's people. Therefore, when the Israelites rejected the Christ, the question arose: Did God fail? Paul says in verse 6, "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." God kept his word. God fulfilled all of his promises. God has never failed. To understand this we must make a distinction between two kinds of Israelites: those who are merely of physical descent and those who are spiritual descendants. This was not a new concept in God's history. It had always been God's way to choose spiritual descendants, distinct from physical descendants. For example, Abraham had many sons. But Isaac was special. Isaac was born by the divine intervention of God according to his promise. Abraham's other sons were born of merely human means. God designated Isaac, the son of the promise, as the son of the covenant.

God continued to choose spiritual descendants and distinguish them in his history. Isaac's wife Rebekah bore twin sons. God chose one of them, Jacob, to be the son of the promise. God did not choose the other son, Esau. God's choice was made before they were born. In this way God shows us that he carries out his redemptive work by his absolute sovereign choice. We may not understand why God does what he does. Nevertheless, God is free to choose whom he wants to choose. God chose Jacob because he wanted to choose Jacob. The consequence of God's choice is truly significant. Jacob became a source of blessing to all future generations. On the other hand, Esau remains a cautionary tale. Millions of Bible teachers have told their Bible students and millions of parents have told their children, "Don't be like Esau. Be like Jacob." But the lesson Paul wants us to learn is that Jacob was chosen, not because of what he did or didn't do, but by the sovereign purpose of God before he was born. Here we must deeply realize that God is absolutely sovereign in choosing the members of his redemptive history. We can never understand God's history by looking at people. We can understand God's history by looking at God.

It is most important for each one of us to accept God's sovereignty in history and in our lives. Many Christians will say that they made a decision of faith to accept Christ. Such a view is man-centered. God's word says that he chose us in him before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4). Jesus told his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit..." (Jn 15:16a). God's work in each of our personal lives began with what God did, not with what we did. We must see ourselves from God's point of view. We must realize that God chose us purely by his grace. Therefore, we have nothing to boast about. Instead, we must thank God for choosing us.

Without accepting God's sovereignty we cannot begin to understand God's work in our lives. Instead, we become rebellious and bitter and complain about everything. But when we accept God's sovereignty we can find peace and meaning and the way to glorify God. Fanny Crosby was born with poor eyesight. In the hope of improving it, her parents arranged for special medical treatment. But it turned out that the doctor was unqualified. He damaged Fanny's eyes beyond recovery. She could have been bitter, hating the quack physician, seeking revenge. Instead, she accepted it in God's sovereignty as God's love. She thought about how to glorify God. She had a talent in music. Her blindness actually helped her to develop this talent. Since she could not see, her mind was free to think creatively and her memory power increased. She could compose hymns quickly in her mind, while other composers needed more time and many sheets of paper. She composed more than 8,000 hymns in her lifetime, many of which are classics. When she accepted God's sovereignty, she was truly happy and blessed.

In Israel's history, Saul and David were both chosen to be king and anointed by the prophet Samuel. But Saul never really accepted God's appointment from his heart. He worried about what people thought—not about what God thought. Once, when facing the Philistines in battle, he offered a sacrifice to God—which only priests were allowed to do—and offended God. Being king made him proud and presumptuous. He did not obey God. He did not love God. He put himself in the place of God. In the course of time, he was overwhelmed with jealousy, became demon possessed and self-destructed. His end was tragic indeed.

David was a shepherd boy, the youngest son of Jesse. God chose him to be a shepherd for his people Israel. David accepted God's appointment from his heart. When the nation trembled before the mighty Goliath, David stepped forward to fight him, believing God's deliverance, and won a great victory. Later, David fled for his life, hunted by King Saul as a political criminal. During that time, David had two chances to kill Saul. But he did not. He saw Saul as the Lord's anointed based on God's sovereignty. David did not hurry to claim the kingship. He trusted God and prayerfully depended on God to carry out his purpose. In the course of time, David's kingship was established. David was happy and fruitful. It was not because he was king, but because he trusted God and thanked God from his heart. May God help each of us to accept God's sovereignty from our hearts.

Fourth, God chooses to have mercy on sinners (14-21).

Look at verse 14. "What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!" The question arises whether God is unjust. Does God arbitrarily choose some people at random and ignore other people for no good reason? Actually, many people think so. Esau and Saul would think so. But Paul says, "Not at all!" Why is it so? Look at verse 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.'" God does not wield his sovereign power to play games with people. God uses his sovereign power to show mercy to the undeserving. Actually, if God carried out absolute justice, no one would survive. We would all be punished with everlasting torment because of our sins. The fact that God shows mercy on anyone is nothing but undeserved grace. No one earns or deserves this mercy. It stems solely from God's compassion for sinners. Paul concludes in verse 16. "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." In his mercy, God uses his sovereign power to save helpless sinners. In his mercy, God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sins. God is not unjust. God is love. God extends mercy to helpless sinners. Thank God.

On the other hand, God punishes those who reject his sovereignty. Look at verse 17. "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'" Pharaoh was the king of the world power nation of the time. Pharaoh thought he could do whatever he wanted with the vast power and wealth of Egypt. But he lived in an illusion. It was God who allowed him and his nation to prosper. When Pharaoh resisted God's plan to let Israel go, God displayed the depth and breadth of his power through him. God systematically destroyed every basis of power and pride in Egypt, including Pharaoh's only son. God accomplished his own purpose in this. God's name was magnified in the world of the time. God's ultimate purpose in world mission is to glorify himself. Jesus taught us to pray, "Father, hallowed be your name...." God carries out world mission for the glory of his own name. This is why he has mercy on sinners. This is also why he punishes those who reject his sovereignty. We must glorify God.

Look at verse 19. Some people ask, "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" These kinds of people are apt to sit down doing nothing, waiting for God to save sinners all by himself. But they ignore the very essence of God's sovereign rule. When we believe God's sovereign rule, we find our own purpose and place in God's history. We have something to do for God and it is absolutely essential that we do it. Those who sit down and complain have not accepted God's sovereignty. So Paul says, "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?" Instead of second-guessing God, we must be eager to find our mission and to carry it out. We can learn from a piece of pottery, like a coffee cup. It does not talk back to the owner. It simply fulfills its intended purpose. May God help each one of us to do the same.

Fifth, accept God's mercy by faith (22-33).

In these last verses, Paul explains that when the people of Israel did not live up to God's purpose, God was not bound to them. God was free to let them experience the due punishment they deserved. Still, God preserved a remnant by his own grace. Conversely, the Gentiles seemed to be overlooked by God. But that was not so. God called people from among the Gentiles to receive his mercy and have salvation. Paul's conclusion is that those who receive God's mercy with simple faith will be saved. But those who reject God's sovereignty and try to gain salvation in another way will surely fail.

Today we learned that God is absolutely sovereign in his redemptive work and history. Our salvation does not depend on human desire or effort, but totally on God's mercy. Let's accept God's sovereignty in our hearts. Let's accept God's overflowing mercy in Jesus Christ.