

Well folks, it's great to be continuing in Paul's incredible letter to the Romans. And today if you have just read or listened to that reading, and you are thinking to yourself, I don't understand that, then don't worry I have been in the same position. You know that in terms of theological and doctrinal debates, Romans Chapter 9 is considered probably the most difficult chapter in the entire Bible to understand. And many ministers when it comes to Chapter 9 will skip it and move on. But I'm not going to do that this morning. I may not do the chapter any real justice, but I do know this – as scripture say *that the word of God is alive and active. It is sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. It is God-breathed and it's useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God, that's each of us, may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

So how dare I omit this chapter, just because it makes an easy life for me. So let's dive right in. If you have your bibles, which I really hope you do, then please open them at Romans 9.

I love space – I love watching all the stuff that's online these days from SpaceX as they test and trial spacecraft that plan to take humans to Mars to set up a new colony there. I love all of that stuff. But back in the 16th Century the polish astronomer Copernicus published a very famous work about the planets. And many will know that this piece of work from Copernicus declared that the sun and the stars do not go round the earth, but in fact the earth and the planets go round the sun. And it got me thinking about this passage today, because it raises the question about who is at the centre of our personal universe. In Chapter 9 Paul is saying that we all need to recognise something about God. By nature everyone of us every day will live aspects of our lives, where we become the centre of our universe, that everything revolves around us. And for some of us, it takes us to a place of thinking that God exists for me. When I am in need or in trouble, I then get in touch with God and ask him to help my life. And then t the rest of the day I get on with my own little universe. But we all need to understand that God is God, he is right at the centre, and therefore we exist **for him**; we revolve **around him**. As Luke declares in the Book of Acts, "*for in him we live, and move, and have our being*". Therefore, anything we receive in our lives, is because of him and his mercy. It is not due to us. So, if nothing else goes in this morning, I hope that does.

Now if everything else this morning seems challenging that is because it is. And what's taught here will cut against the grain of our hearts and our culture. It's so important.

So, as we delve into this chapter, let's get our bearings. Paul is writing to this group of Christians who are in Rome. In the first 8 chapters he has discussed the seriousness of turning away from God, as if God doesn't exist. He then explains the wonder of God's rescue plan through Jesus' coming, and through his death, and his resurrection brings hope for this world. Then Paul explains the Christian life that flows from that. And then 2 weeks ago we ended looking at that Giant of all Chapters, Chapter 8, with the assurance that nothing will be able to separate us from God's love that comes through Jesus Christ our Lord. What an incredible promise!

And so now we land in chapter 9, and suddenly there's a change of topic and a change of tone. Paul zooms in on the Jews, on the people of Israel – these are God's chosen people who have been given so many privileges. They were the people God entered into a covenantal relationship with. They are the ones that God made himself known to. They were the people that God dwelt among. And they are the people from whom came Jesus – the Messiah. Israel was so privileged. But here's the problem. As Paul is writing this letter, most of the Jews were not God's people, most wouldn't believe in Jesus whom God had sent. And so how does Paul feel about that? Well in verse 2 he says "*I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart*". He is so hurt that his fellow people have been cut off from

God. And in verse 1 he makes it clear by stating that he's not lying. In fact in verse 3 he states that he would rather perish in hell for the sake of his fellow people so that they could receive all the blessings from God and eternal life. It has cut Paul to the heart.

And that has got to challenge us this morning. If today you are here and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, I am so glad you are with us today, but it's got to challenge you and make you consider what it is that you are missing out on today. Because in Paul's mind it's everything. Your life is incomplete of purpose if you don't have that relationship with the Lord Jesus. Now, if this morning you are here and you are a Christian, then Paul's example should make us consider how we feel about those we know who don't know Jesus. I had a real example this week where I was in the company of a Jewish rabbi, and he was praying the Aaronic blessing in Hebrew over a group of people. And whilst it was wonderful to hear the Old Testament scriptures being spoken in the original language, it grieved me deeply to think that this man doesn't accept Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Remember that Jesus said "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*".

Now as we move on, it would be very easy for all of us to tune out a bit this morning. We can tend to feel that because this chapter is all about the Jews then this is nothing to do with us. Don't do that folks. Here's why. Ultimately this issue of the Jews is much bigger than Paul's heartache. These chapters are about God and how he saves anybody - yes for the Jews, but actually for all of us. Secondly it raises massive issues about God and his integrity and those questions have huge implications for you and me. So what do I mean? Well God said he would do various things for the people of Israel - God promised that Israel was his chosen people, he promised that he would save them. So what has happened now? Has God broken his promise? Paul's fellow people have walked away from God. So can God really be trusted? And therefore if it can be seen that God has broken his promises to the Jews, then what about the promises he has made to you and me? Can we trust him? And that's where Paul starts. His first main point is this - God is faithful to his word. Verse 6 Paul says "*It is not as though God's word had failed*". That's Paul's biggest concern - is God trustworthy? And Paul's answer is yes, the promises he made to Israel will be honoured, but we have got to understand what God had promised - because there is a true Israel within the wider Israel, and God will keep his promises to them. Verse 6 Paul explains "*For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel*". He's saying that not everyone who has an Israeli passport is a member of God's true Israel. Being part of God's family is not just about being able to trace one's roots back to Father Abraham. It's got to be more than that. Paul goes on, "*Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children*". And here Paul provides a real example. You will remember that Abraham, in desperation for a child, tried to quicken things up a little. He sleeps with his servant girl Hagar and she has a son called Ishmael, but Ishmael's descendants are not considered God's people even though they had come from Abraham biologically. God had decided that his blessings would come from Isaac. It came from a promise from God, rather than what Abraham wanted to do through his own fleshly desire. You see what I mean about where the centre of the universe is - it's not through man's intervention, it's through God. It's God's, call not our works and Paul states this in verse 12. Ultimately it's his initiative and not ours.

Now for those of you that are following your bibles, and that's always why it's important to have your bibles with you each Sunday, you might have noticed a bit of controversy in verse 13 concerning Paul's second example of how God chooses and not us, Paul refers to the prophet Malachi by saying this, "*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*". That word 'hated' is a really tough word. Is the prophet saying that God hated Esau, even though Esau didn't have any choice in the matter? Now hopefully you will understand that it doesn't literally mean that

God hates Esau. The prophet Malachi is referring to the two nations that come from these family lines – that's Israel and Edom. However, in fulfilment of prophecy, God chooses Jacob (that's Israel), over Esau as the one through whom to send the blessing. Jacob became the father of the nation of Israel. Like Isaac, the second son of Abraham, who was chosen over Ishmael, Jacob/Israel was the child of promise and the one through whom the Messiah was to come. So folks, it's not that God hated Esau (although I understand that's literally what's said in both Malachi and Romans). The point is that God has chosen Jacob. God has chosen Isaac. God has chosen the Jews, and God has chosen the Christians, who are the real children of Abraham.

Whether we are familiar with all that Old Testament stuff the principle is this – God chooses who he saves. If I'm a Christian then that's because God has decided, not because of my background, or because I have had Christian parents. Not because I am good, or I am worthy. It's got nothing to do with us. It's in spite of what's in us, It's simply because God has chosen us, he has chosen to set his love on us. The more you think about that, the more humbling it is, that it's not down to us, it's down to him.

Now Paul is going to come onto the roles and our responsibility that each one of us has in this, and that's in Chapter 10 so you're going to have to wait until we get there. But as we sit in chapter 9, I realise that if you've thought this through enough, there may be really big questions in your mind right now, and Paul knows this, so the rest of the passage deals with one of those big issues.

Verse 14 – *“What then shall we say? Is God unjust?”* In other words, isn't God being unfair? If it's all about him choosing who he saves. It might sound as if God can simply choose or reject people, depending on how he is feeling. But Paul answers this *“Not at all”*. God saves purely out of his mercy.

If we are thinking in terms of justice, then we are in the wrong space, we need to think of his mercy. And so Paul takes us in verse 15 to one final example from Scripture, and that is the example of the Golden Calf incident in Exodus 33. So why does he choose this example? Well it's because none of the people involved deserved God's mercy – they've rejected him, they've been bowing down and worshipping idols, and so the right thing for God to do would be to destroy them all. But what God says is this *“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion”*.

In other words, it's up to me what I do to these people, it's up to me whether I forgive these people. And as Paul says in verse 16, it doesn't depend on human will, but on God's mercy. In other words it doesn't depend on what we want, or what we do. We have no position to claim anything from God. Like back then, we are the guilty ones. We don't deserve anything from God. It's up to him to decide whether he shows mercy. So it's incredible that God would choose to have mercy on anybody. So Paul concludes in verse 18 by saying *“Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden”*.

When God is faced with people who reject him and his will, he can choose to have mercy, but he can also choose to harden people. That doesn't mean he takes people who want to believe in him and turns their heart against him, no. Rather God looks at a group of rebellious people and chooses to confirm some of them in their rebellion. He's not being unfair. When faced with a world that rejects him, he can choose to have mercy and also he can choose let their hearts harden.

So as we close, what does this do to us?

It should firstly move us to worship; that God has chosen us. That he has shown mercy to us. We have no claim on him. A guilty criminal has no claim on the judge. A criminal can't tell a judge what to do. And similarly, we might think we can do the same with God, but no, we only can plead mercy from him. And if today you have not given your life to God, then

can I urge you to cry out to him for mercy. If you do, you will find him to be rich in mercy.
[Offer resources]

But for many of us today who are Christians, then we should worship him for his mercy today. If this section does not lead you to worship today, then you have not understood this passage. Your heart should be responding right now in love to him. Worship.

The other implication today is about our unity. It should reflect how we respond to one another. For the Christian who you find hard to get on with, you need to consider the mercy that God has shown to them, and when you realise that, then you will also recognise the mercy that he has poured on you. And in that place of understanding the undeserved grace and mercy from God, then unity in the body of Christ will flourish. Do you know why unity generally doesn't come in people? It's usually because they're so caught up in their own world, that they forget the mercy of God on them.

So worship comes, unity comes. And then thirdly, it has implications for our prayers. The misunderstanding that some can have from this passage today is to think, that if God is the centre of everything, then that leaves us with nothing to do. Let's therefore think about Paul - he didn't wait around for God to do everything. Listen to Chapter 10:1 "*Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved*". His response to God's mercy was to pray for those who were not part of God's people. And so he challenges you and challenges me to pray – pray for your colleagues, your family, your friends, pray that God would have mercy on them as he has had mercy on us. Sometimes we may think as we look at people we may think that they will never believe. But let me encourage you. There's a story told of a person who spoke to John Newton who was a slave trader who gave his life to the Lord. And the person asked about the likelihood of a person becoming a Christian, and whether it was ever possible. Newton replied that he never despaired of anyone being converted to Christianity because God had saved him. If God has had mercy on you and mercy on me, then God can have mercy on anyone, and we need to be praying that he will.

Folks, God is faithful to his word. He chooses those he saves. And he saves purely out of mercy. When we start to grasp that, it should move us to a deeper level of worship, it should encourage us in our unity, and it should drive us to prayer.

Let's pray as we finish.