

The Merciful Potter: understanding God's predestining of individuals for participation in history and salvation.

Prelude to the sermon for sermon readers and Small Group leaders:

This section of Romans 9-11 holds some difficult and controversial passages. If it raises more questions than answers for you, you're not alone. Solid Biblical scholars have come to completely different conclusions concerning Paul's remarks here. I can easily believe that the Apostle Peter was thinking of this section when he remarked, *There are some things in [Paul's letters] hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures* (2 Peter 3:16)

So let me insert a prelude here, hopefully to help you gain a slightly better understanding of how the two separate predestinations of God, that Paul is writing about, actually play a vital part of His merciful nature and plans for our future (something I doubt I could communicate intelligibly in a 15 minute sermon).

As today's title indicated, Along with our eternal lives, so too our individual participation in world history are both in the hands of the Merciful Potter – who is truly *working all things together for good for those who love Him and who are called according to His purpose* (8:28). Though we may not understand His purposes, He has shown us in so many other ways that we can trust Him to care for our lives both in eternity and in the near future.

In Romans 9, Paul's invisible critics have called for him to answer 3 challenges to the trustworthiness and righteousness of God in regard to keeping His promises to Israel. But the largely unspoken question driving all these challenges and the rest of chapters 9-11 is:

If God had originally chosen Israel to fulfill his promises to Abraham (being nationally blessed, blessing all nations, and birthing messiah) **is He now rejecting Israel by including gentiles in those promises?**

If you keep this question in mind, it will help you better understand that these **next three chapters in Romans are referring largely to Israel's' previous, present, and future, participation as a nation in "salvation history"** (those people chosen to move God's plans for the world forward). And while Paul does occasionally refer to predestination for "**personal salvation**" (example: Romans 10:9-13), his primary focus in this section is on **national election**; or who actually qualifies as God's "chosen people" for participation in salvation history and why.

That this is Paul's primary argument, is supported by his repeated references to national Israel's relationship with God at the start and end of each of these chapters (9:1-5, 10:1-4, 11:1-7, 11:25-32). Thus, when Paul concludes his argument in chapter 11:26 with the line "*and so all Israel will be saved,*" we can know that he is talking about restoration of Israel as a nation not unconditional universal salvation for each of its individual fleshly members.

As Bible scholars, we have to be very careful not to confuse God's predestining of an individual's or a nation's participation in **salvation history** with God's plans for that individual's **personal salvation**. While Ishmael and Esau were rejected from Abraham's

promised inheritance, that doesn't necessarily mean that we won't see them in Heaven some day. The same goes for Pharaoh, chosen to suffer through ten plagues so God could prove his power to all the surrounding nations Israel would pass through in the coming years – which is exactly what happened (see Joshua 2:1-11). But after seeing the ruination of his land, the decimation of his army and the death of his son, Pharaoh could have (should have) been sensible enough to repent and acknowledge God's sovereignty; like another great pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar, whom God made a point of revealing himself to (but it took Nebuchadnezzar 7-years of madness before he came around). **Therefore it is important to keep these distinctions very clearly in your mind: just because you have not been "chosen" to play a part in God's world plans, does not mean that He has not chosen you to become His child; one is a matter of historic record while the other is just between you and God.** Who even in His dueling with Pharaoh who was predestined for this duel, God was still trying to be gracious as you will discover in a few minutes.

So, having attempted to establish a clear distinction between these two different purposes for God's predestination, let's focus on the three challenges of God's faithfulness towards national Israel as they are answered in chapter 9; and we will deal with other aspects of Israel's chosen place in history next week.

(so now here is the sermon).

The Merciful Potter: Romans 9:17-33 Jeremiah 18:6-12

In 1501 Michelangelo was commissioned to carve a large statue of David. In the quarries he found a huge block of marble over 16' tall and weighing several tons; it had been nicknamed "the giant". However, with several obvious faults, this particular piece of stone was considered spoiled and had been passed over by other carvers; But Michelangelo couldn't take his eyes off of it. Every day he would walk over to where it stood, touch it, measure it, and caress it. Finally he decided to work with it and for the next two years he chipped off the parts that were spoiled and chiseled the rest into the image he wanted it to be. Today, Michelangelo's David is considered to be one of the greatest works of art in Renaissance culture, It is also a wonderful example of how an artist can take something that it marred and turn it into something marvelous.

In the same way God is an artist. In fact, **God is the ultimate performance artist working with the flawed malleable material of human lives in the real time of human history to bring to pass His plans for the salvation of all His children; those he had chosen from "*before the foundation of the world*"** (Ephesians 1:4). And this is what Romans 9-11 is largely about.

As we learned last week, Paul had just concluded his arguments on why salvation is by faith through God's grace which He chose to extend to us sinners who never could have obtained it any other way.

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement... effective through faith. Romans 3:23-25

And just as Paul concludes that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God who is *working to bring good out of all circumstances for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose* (Romans 8:28), one of his invisible critics – Paul has anticipated and answered this crowd several times already in his letter – speaks up and says, ***well if that is God is so loving and faithful, then why has he apparently left the Jews behind and now seems more concerned with saving Gentiles?*** It's as if the Jewish nation stood up in mass and said, God, you're not truthful, you're not trustworthy, you're not playing fair... you promised us that we would be your chosen people. It is that question, of who actually qualifies as God's "chosen" people, which stands behind these three challenges that Paul must now answer.

- 1. Has God failed by not including all of Israel in His promise?**
- 2. Isn't God unjust to only choose some people to be a part of that promise?**
- 3. If He is the one who predestined us to fulfill certain roles, why does God find fault in us when we do?**

Paul's surprising answer to the first challenge is what we handled last week. That God never promised to include all of Israel in His plans, because God's promises to Abraham were only given to a few of his descendants, whom God has in His mercy specifically had chosen even before they were even born; so that God's predestinations would have nothing to do with human merit and everything to do with God's mercy.

WE saw this verse last week...

This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. Romans 9:8

And right here is where Paul begins to turn the argument towards why God is justified in now including as heirs of Abraham's promise not only Gentiles, and everyone else who comes to God "by faith." Because Paul has earlier established that it is faith which marks one as a true (spiritual) descendant Abraham and thus an heir according to the promise. We also saw this verse a few weeks back ...

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law (Israel) but also to all those (Gentiles) who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of all of us. Romans 4:16

So that is how we gentiles get to be counted as heirs of Abraham's promises: by faith, just like Abraham. Paul's going to explain this a bit further in a moment. But right now, we need to clearly understand that this whole debate in chapters 8-11 has less to do with an individual's predestination for salvation, and much more to do with Israel's predestination as a nation to play a unique role, and receive special privileges, as national participants in God's plans for world history. Thus, while Ishmael and Esau were rejected from Abraham's promised inheritance, that doesn't necessarily mean that we won't see them in Heaven some day. **just because a person has not been "chosen" to play a part in God's plans for world history, does not mean that God has also not chosen that person to be saved; one predestination is a matter of historic record while the other is just between you and God.** This same truth holds for Pharaoh whom Paul brings up as his next example of the mercy of God.

Interestingly, when Paul quotes God as saying "*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy,*" – which makes God seem rather harsh and uncaring – this quote actually comes out of a conversation where Moses was trying to leverage his personal relationship with God as a means of guaranteeing that God would continue to maintain the signs of His physical presence among the "stiffnecked" tribes of Israel who had once again turned away from God (the physical signs were the pillar of fire and smoke that proceeded their march. See Exodus 33:13-19). In other words, God was saying to Moses – his most loyal follower - "don't try to force my hand. Not, your faithfulness but only my mercy will determine how I work with anybody, including these tribes of Israel. Which stands true for us as well; a parent's faith does not make their child a Christian. God has no grandchildren. Each person must by faith come to God as an individual." Moses, by his faithfulness, could not guarantee God's continued presence with the nation of Israel; only those whom God had – out of mercy – chosen to bless.

Then interestingly, in response to the next charge of God's choosing being unjust, Paul brings up Pharaoh – the ultimate bad guy in Israel's eyes – as an example of why God is just in choosing certain people to play certain historic roles.

God said to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power through you to the rest of the nations (Romans 9:17 paraphrased)

Now if you turn in your Bibles to Exodus 9:13-21, because this is too much for me to put up on a screen (*pew bibles it is at the top of page 56*). God has already brought 6 plagues down upon Egypt, so that even the magicians who had formerly copied Moses miracles were covered with boils so that they could not now confront him. And yes, scripture records that God has up to this point hardened Pharaoh's heart so he was still refusing to let Israel go. But this time God has a heart to heart talk with Pharaoh. Saying that up until now the plagues had involved rivers and bugs and things like that, but the next set of plagues would be directed against people's lives and specifically Pharaoh himself and his household, "*so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth*"(Ex. 9:14).

And then God says something very interesting in verse 15:

by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But this is why I have let you live: to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth. You are still exalting yourself against my people, and will not let them go. (Exodus 9:15-17).

The way I read this, God was basically saying to Pharaoh, *If I just wanted to kill you, I could have done that long ago. But I have been patient and waited for you to change your mind, but you keep resisting me.* Therefore

Tomorrow at this time I will cause the heaviest hail to fall that has ever fallen in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. Send, therefore, and have your livestock and everything that you have in the open field brought to a secure place; every human or animal that is in the open field and is not brought under shelter will die when the hail comes down upon them. (9:18-19)

Why would God advise Pharaoh to bring his livestock and workers in from the fields to protect them from the promised upcoming hail storm? Because God did not want to kill those people and animals just because of Pharaoh's continued resistance. God was showing mercy to Pharaoh and the Egyptians at the same time as He was showing His power to the surrounding nations. The story goes on to say that those among Pharaoh's officials who believed Moses brought their cattle and workers in but those who did not, left their workers in the fields. Big mistake, not believing God.

So, as a member of the nation at this time, every Israeli benefited from God's promises to Abraham, but that does not mean that every individual Israeli believed in God and would later be counted among those "chosen by God" – as many of them proved through their later acts of unbelief in the wilderness. This was a D-Day like event where God was dealing with Israel and Egypt on a national level. Yes individuals are involved but national objectives are at stake.

As Eisenhower laid plans for D-Day, I am sure that he grieved long in advance for the many lives that he knew would be lost – both among the innocent and guilty that day, and certainly because of decisions that he was making. But he had just one objective that must be accomplished by those 156,000 troops that he was going to land on Normandy's beaches; the establishment of a beachhead in Europe leading to the eventual defeat of Hitler. Every soldier's participation in this event – on either side – made them neither a good or a bad person (I am sure there were plenty of both).

Among the 2,499 American soldiers who died on D-Day, there were certainly many faithful Christians who were praying for protection and deliverance. While there were also many who were clueless about God but who survived the day to live to a ripe old age.

The point is that one's personal relationship with God does not necessarily change their participation in God's predetermined historic events. And that is what Paul is trying to clarify in these chapters. So, here's the point again. God's duel with Pharaoh was a predestined event in history in order to show His power over the non-existent Egyptian gods and to bring Israel out of its 400 years of slavery – as God had earlier promised Abraham that He would do. But that predestination of Pharaoh to be a part of this historic event, has nothing to do with whether or not God has chosen to save Pharaoh. After seeing the ruination of his land, the decimation of his army and the death of his son, Pharaoh could have (should have) been sensible enough to finally repent and acknowledge God's sovereignty; like another great pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar, whom God made a point of revealing himself to (of course it took Nebuchadnezzar 7-years of madness before he came around). Will we meet Pharaoh and his son in Heaven some day? Only God and Pharaoh know that answer (but the son, I am pretty sure we will). God who is known for and has shown His mercy to Pharaoh, said, *I will have mercy on who I will have mercy. So it depends not on our human will or exertion but on God who shows mercy* (9:16).

Which brings up the last challenge and Paul's most difficult reply ... until you know the Biblical context behind that reply. **Why does God find fault? If He is the one who predestined us to fulfill certain roles in history how can He blame us when we do?**

Paul's reply, "*what right has the clay to challenge the potter,*" seems rather callous. But then take a second look at this illustration. There are multiple places in the Old Testament where the Potter has been used as a reference to God's shaping his people according to His needs. But I think the one Paul was referring to here was **Jeremiah 18:6-12** which we read this morning.

So the potter is sitting at his wheel and, as needed, from the same batch of clay can fashion vessels for honorable or less than honorable uses; both soup pots and chamber pots are needed items. God likewise ordains times and events and peoples for purposes of His choosing, some for noble purposes and some for common use. Most of us, unlike Isaiah, Paul, Moses and Pharaoh, are common vessels which God wants to use for everyday purposes. Even if those purposes are not apparent, that is no reason to doubt that God's righteousness and holy love are not working in and through them. Might I add, it would be an odd potter indeed who made vessels simply to destroy them; that he is making a vessel on his potter's wheel is because he needs it to fulfill a useful purpose.

But now remember that in Jeremiah's story, the potter has started out fashioning one type of vessel – let's say a vessel that he intends for honorable use – but he finds something in the way that the clay is responding to his hands that causes him to change his mind and shape the vessel for another use. Jeremiah goes on to say this works the same way with nations. If honorable nations that God is shaping for a purpose do less than honorable things, God can

decide to reshape that nation for another purpose. Just like what God has done with the nation of Israel.

All along, when God was forming the nation of Israel in the wilderness He was also warning them that should they turn from away from Him, He would also turn away from them – that's not God breaking His promise that was always part of His promise.

So, now in Romans 9:22-25 referring to National Israel Paul says, *What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'"*

I am sure that this was quite a shock to his audience to hear Paul claim that God for a long time has tolerated and brought along national Israel because of His promises – even though Israel, for a long time, has not lived up to their end of the promises; they had continually wandered away from God, worshipped the wrong things, and in Paul's day established a completely false way to lay claim to God's righteousness – by heritage and kosher living. But God used Israel anyway in order to show himself to all those other people that He had long ago intended to bring into His family. (Abraham was promised that he would be counted as the father of many nations). So, like a potter, when Israel wandered away from Him, God shifted his plans and shaped Israel for another purpose. Then God reached out for another lump of clay – the Gentiles – to begin forming His next vessel, the church, for his next purpose. Paul then concludes by saying that in fact all people who come to God by Faith will be counted among Abraham's promised heirs. Because the promise of Righteousness has always come by having a faith just like Abrahams.

So all of Chapter nine is actually talking about God's grand plans for the history of the world and who He chooses to use to fulfill those plans. All along Paul says, God had planned predestined to bring Gentiles into his family (*through you all the nations of the world will be blessed*). And the Jews failure to faithfully honor that task is what actually caused it to come to pass! You see God does *work to bring good out of all situations for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.*

Which brings up just one final tough question. **So if all of Israel were to stray away from adherence to God's Promise, then hasn't God failed Abraham by not bringing his originally chosen people along anyway?** Paul will deal a lot more with Israel's future in Chapter 11, but he assures us that God has ways of always keeping His promise to also bless the physical (not just spiritual) descendants of Israel. God's method for doing so is mentioned here in chapter 9 and again in chapter 11 -- it is that God is always keeping a **remnant** of Israel faithful to himself so that He can always keep His promises to Abraham. As Paul wrote earlier in this chapter,

It is not as though the word of God had failed.
For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel,
and not all of Abraham's children
are his true descendants. Romans 9:6-7

But some faithful descendants – a remnant of Israel – will always remain. Even though God had used and moved the nation of Israel along through their continued history of disobedience and rejection, even while the majority had gone astray there always has been and always will be a remnant in Israel who kept the faith and through whom God could keep His promises to Abraham. I believe that the Messianic Jewish movement of today now comprises part of that promised remnant through whom God can one day reestablish and bless the nation of Israel.

And the lesson for us is the same. How many people who claim the name "Christian" have actually come to God in the faith of Abraham? I suspect the answer for us is also only a remnant. Jesus did say, *narrow is the way and hard and few there are who find it* (Matthew 7:14).

Which I think should leave us all with one desperate personal question that you may be asking yourself right now:

- Have I been included among God's chosen people?
- How do I know if I have been called according to His purpose?
- Or am I just another vessel being used but planned for destruction?

While I can't guarantee you this. I think that the very fact that you are here in worship and that you are worried about your relationship with God, is a pretty good sign that you are among those He long ago foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and one day will glorify.

Because if you weren't among the "chosen," I doubt you would even be concerned about your personal relationship with God.

That's enough to think about for today. Let's pray about this and come to the table to remind ourselves of how richly God has blessed us ... whom He foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and will one day glorify through his Son Jesus the Christ, our savior and Lord.

Amen