



Group Discussion Guide

Romans 9:1-18

For groups meeting April 26 evening through May 3 morning.

After considering the power of God's love, Paul then turned his attention to those who did not know Christ, specifically his Jewish brothers. He shared how his heart was broken for them because so many of them had chosen to reject the Messiah (vs. 1-2). In fact, his feelings were so strong that, if he could be "cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers" so that they would be saved, he would (v. 3). In verses 4-5, Paul listed all that they had been given. In doing so, he highlighted how privileged they were to be God's chosen people, but in doing so he also pointed out how all of these gifts could not ensure that each Israelite would accept Jesus as Savior.

At this point, it should be noted that Romans 9-11 carries a common theme and therefore should be read and understood as a unit. The way we are moving through Romans prevents us from focusing on these three chapters during the course of one week. Still, we must do what we can to understand them as flowing together so that we view Paul's writing in its context. The main theme in these chapters is the sovereignty of God in His dealing with mankind, and His grace as it relates to His sovereignty.

We should appreciate that Paul directly addressed some tough concepts in this section of his letter. After calling attention to all that God had given to Israel, he wrote, "But it is not as though the Word of God has failed," (v. 6). Paul no doubt knew that when his readers considered how God had given the Jews the covenants, the law, the promises (v. 4), they would wonder if God's efforts to lead them in righteousness through the acceptance of Christ had fallen short. Paul was led to use three examples to show that the word of God had not failed Israel. These examples would demonstrate how Israel's rejection of Jesus was part of God's sovereign plan.

The first example was that of Ishmael and Isaac. God had promised that Abraham would have a son, and that through this son his covenant with Abraham would be fulfilled (Genesis 15:4-5). However, after his wife Sarah was unable to conceive, she decided to give her servant Hagar to him so that he could father a child with her instead (Genesis 16:1-4). This union of Abraham and Hagar resulted in the birth of Ishmael. But Ishmael was not to be the son of promise. Instead, God specifically told Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son together even in their old age, and this son would be the one to fulfill God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 17:15-16). What was Paul's point in referencing these events in verses 6-9? It was this: God had a plan and this meant that although Ishmael was a son of Abraham, it was Isaac who was the son of promise.

This same point was reinforced in verses 10-13 as Paul moved to his second example and reminded his readers how Isaac and Rebekah had two sons together, and even though they both came from the same parents (v. 10), one would be chosen by God to continue His plan to bring the Messiah into the world (v. 12). Paul emphasized that this choice was made by God even before either of the boys were born, therefore negating any merit by their works (v. 11). In verse 12, The apostle quoted God's words in Genesis 25:23 and pointed out, "The older" (Esau) "will serve the younger" (Jacob). While Esau did not directly serve Jacob, his descendants did serve Jacob's descendants. Paul also quoted the prophet Malachi who wrote that God chose Jacob instead of Esau and in doing so demonstrated His love for Israel (Malachi 1:2-3). The meaning of the statement "Esau I hated" should not be interpreted as literal hatred, but rather as relative to a higher choice such as in Matthew 6:24, Luke 14:26 and John 12:25.

Again, to his credit, Paul directly addressed something he believed these examples would prompt from his readers: "Is there injustice on God's part?" (v. 14). This is a valid question, given that Paul had demonstrated how God chose some and rejected others. Did this mean that Ishmael and Esau had been treated unfairly? Paul's answer, as it was with other questions he posed, was "By no means!" What is interesting is how Paul supported this answer. He pointed to how God had told Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion," (v. 15, quoted from Genesis 33:19). The context of this quote is God's promise to Moses as he met with God on the mountain ... the promise to be with him and with Israel as they moved toward the promised land. This was in answer to a question from Moses, "For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:16). Moses and Israel had not earned God's favor; it was given to them just as it was to Noah so many years before (Genesis 6:8). Paul was very clear how this works as he wrote, "it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy," (v. 16).

For his third and final example, Paul wrote about Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Paul quoted what God had said to Pharaoh through Moses in Exodus 9:16, just after warning the king that hail would fall and kill any person or animal left out in the fields. God told Pharaoh that He had placed the king in his position ("I have raised you up") so that all the world would know God's power and His name (v. 17). Later in that chapter, Pharaoh hardened his own heart after the hail, fire and thunder had ceased (Exodus 9:34). It was only after Pharaoh had chosen not to acknowledge the Lord that God then hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 9:35, 10:1-2). Based on these three examples from the Old Testament, Paul wrote that God "has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills," (v. 18).

In the second portion of Romans 9, Paul began by addressing the questions "Why does he still find fault?" and "who can resist his will?" (v. 19). We will walk with him through this next week. But for this week, it's important for us to consider some things. First, we must go back to Romans 8:28-30. In those verses, we see God's foreknowledge working in conjunction with His conforming of people; specifically His knowledge of who would accept Jesus and then His work to conform those people into the image of Jesus. It stands to reason that if He knows who will

accept Jesus, He also knows who will reject Jesus. It is through this truth about God's foreknowledge that we can best view the teaching that God has mercy on some and hardens others, according to His will. His foreknowledge and His will go hand in hand.

Second, we must consider our own understanding of God and His ways in light of our limitations. God is all-knowing, while we are not. God is all-powerful, while we are not. God is holy, and we who believe are only holy through the righteousness of Christ which is a gift of God. Paul addressed this in Romans 11:33-36, which we will get to in a few weeks. He also wrote about this in 1 Corinthians 13:12. One day we will fully understand these mysteries of God, but during our earthly lives our humanity prevents that higher understanding. This is why faith is so important.

Finally, faith is the key to reading and understanding more difficult concepts such as our free will, God's sovereignty, His justice and His grace. We must look to the Gospel. Where do we see God's sovereignty? Where do we see God's love? Where do we see His justice? His grace? We see all of these in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The heart of our God is seen in 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." He desires that all people would repent and turn to Christ, and that none would perish, though He knows those who will accept Him and those who will reject. Paul chose to deal with all of this directly, though he knew some would no doubt misinterpret what he wrote. In fact, Peter referenced this very fact:

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

We must remember that without God's gift of the Gospel, not one person would be saved. And we must also remember that every single one of us deserves God's judgment upon our sin. It is by His grace that we are saved. Would we rather have some sort of merit system whereby we could earn salvation? If this were the case, we all would fail. It is far better for this to be in the hands of our gracious, almighty God.

Discussion Questions

1. How are you convicted and/or inspired by Paul's desire to his fellow Israelites saved, as he expressed in Romans 9:1-3?
2. It's easy for us to read about all the privileges Israel received and question why so many Jews have chosen to reject Jesus. Why do you think the Jewish people (in general) have found it so hard to believe Jesus is the Messiah?
3. What do you think is Paul's point in using the example of Ishmael and Isaac as supporting his statement that the word of God has not failed Israel (v. 6)?
4. Is it difficult for you accept that God chose Jacob over Esau, as Paul wrote about in vs. 10-13? Why or why not?
5. Where do you see God's mercy in His dealings with Pharaoh? His justice?
6. How do you feel about Paul's statement in v. 16, "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy"? Does this give you peace? Why or why not?
7. How do the sovereignty of God, the foreknowledge of God and the Gospel work as the keys to understanding what Paul writes in this passage? What should we do when we don't fully understand something in Scripture, even after we've spent time trying to understand?