

“The Freedom of God”

XXXI. Texts that Transform

Romans 9:15

For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

During the period of rapid spiritual growth my sophomore year in college, I couldn't get enough of Bible study, John MacArthur's preaching, and Christian fellowship on campus. Yet I was troubled by the old question of the destiny of “the heathen in Africa,” as the issue typically was expressed. What about those who've never heard the gospel? Jesus declared (Jn 14:6) and the Bible teaches (Acts 4:12; 1 Jn 5:11, 12; 1 Tim 2:5) one way of salvation, that of faith in Jesus Christ. However, if there are those who have never heard the gospel, how could that be fair, I wondered? Worse, campus skeptics regularly were hurling the accusation at campus Christians that we were prejudiced, bigoted, know-it-all who thought we were right and the *rest of the world was wrong*. Faithful Christian witness was troubling and intimidating in such an environment, compounded by our own doubts and confusion.

One weekend I went home to enjoy a couple of days of parental indulgence. I went to college in the fall of 1973, and my sisters married in December of 1973 and January of 1974, emptying the house and depriving my mother of her primary maternal duties of the previous 22 years. She never complained or even spoke of her struggle with her new life with an empty nest. However, when I came home from college thereafter, motherly care was lavished upon me. The fatted calf

was slain and we ate like royalty. My dirty clothes were eagerly and tenderly washed. It was great! On this particular weekend we had as guests for dinner the Rev. Lennox and Wilma Palin. For most of my early childhood he was our pastor at the First Baptist Church of San Pedro, California. Rev. Palin was a childhood friend of my father's. Their families were members of the First Baptist Church in Asbury Park, New Jersey, and my father followed him to Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California in 1951. By this time he was pastor of the San Gabriel Union Church. Just before dessert I asked Rev. Palin the question: what about those who've never heard of Christ? What about the heathen in Africa?

His answer was surprising, even shocking. He quoted from Romans 9:15, itself a citation of Exodus 33:19. Rev. Palin answered, "God says, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and compassion on whom I have compassion.' God does not owe us salvation. He is not under obligation to save anyone." That was the gist of his answer.

It was one of those moments. His answer was blunt and startling. Yet it was immediately self-evident to me. Of course, if God is God, He owes us nothing. If God is God, we cannot place Him under obligation. This was my first lesson on the freedom of God. If God is God, "He does whatever He pleases" (Eccl 8:3; Pss 115:3; 135:6; Dan 4:35).

This was no simplistic proof text, as a closer examination of the wider text will show.

The freedom of God

The Apostle Paul in the ninth chapter of Romans is raising the question of Jewish unbelief. Why is it that the people of Israel, the Jews, the Bible experts, those with all the advantages (Rom 9:4, 5), those who were looking for Messiah and of all people ought to recognize Him when He arrived, do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah? His answer is, “It is not as though the word of God has failed” (Rom 9:6a). The problem is not some defect in the message, some weakness in the gospel or its messengers. What, then, explains Israel’s unbelief? Not all Israel is Israel; there is a true Israel within Israel.

*For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, (Rom 9:6b)
7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring,
but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” 8 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 offspring. (Rom 9:7, 8)*

Physical descent does not a true Israelite, or true believer make. There are those who are “descended from Israel” who do not “belong to Israel.” There is a church within a church, an invisible as well as a visible church. There are the “children of the flesh,” mere physical descendants, and “children of the promise,” those who are spiritual descendants, true believers. Within Israel there is a false as well as a true Israel.

What is the difference between the two types of descendants? God made a choice. God decided that His promise to Abraham would be fulfilled “through Isaac,” not Ishmael (v 7). The children

of the promise are the “children of God” and all others are the “children of the flesh,” merely human descendants. The Apostle leads us to dig deeper.

⁹ For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.”¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (Rom 9:9-13)

The next generation, Rebekah’s twins Jacob and Esau, provides the clearest example of God’s sovereign freedom. The objection might be raised that the difference between Isaac and Ishmael rests in their mothers. Isaac was born to Sarah and Ishmael to Hagar. However, Jacob and Esau were of the same mother, the same father, occupying the same womb at the same time. Jacob was chosen over Esau before they were born and before either “had done anything good or bad” (9:11a).

They had done nothing to distinguish the one from the other. What distinction was made, God made. He chose. His promise was for one and not the other. His “purpose of election” was the deciding factor (9:11b). God decided that “the older will serve the younger” (9:12). God determined to love Jacob and hate Esau (the Apostle citing Mal 1:2). Esau is left in his sin and therefore continues to be an object of God’s wrath, whereas Jacob is loved and therefore rescued from his sin.

But we thought that God loved everyone, one objects. Doesn't He? Yes – He “so loved the world” (Jn 3:16). He loves His enemies (Mt 5:44, 45). Yet He has a *particular* love for His chosen. He loves them with *redemptive* love, with *saving* love. That love is not universal, but reserved for the elect. “We love because He first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19), loved us not with a general love for humanity but with an electing love for His people. The point is, because God is God, He is free to do as He pleases, to choose one and not the other. He is not obligated to choose *either*. He may decide to choose both or He may decide to choose *neither*. Or He may decide to choose one. God is free to do as He pleases.

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! (Rom 9:14)

“Carnal reason dares reprehend,” says Trapp, “what it does not comprehend.”¹ The common objection is anticipated. Isn't this an “injustice on God's part?” Isn't this unfair? That the Apostle gives voice to our objection is confirmation that we have understood him correctly. He denies any injustice vehemently: “By no means!” Yet he continues writing, not at all attempting to demonstrate how God is being fair, or how His choosing Jacob and rejecting Esau is just. For example, he doesn't resort to God's foreknowledge for the basis of His choosing. He doesn't say God knew Esau would be a bad character and Jacob better. He affirms the opposite. Jacob was chosen “not because of works” (9:11). The doctrine of election is at the foundation of the doctrines of grace. This is reaffirmed in Romans 11 when the Apostle reassures us that the true Israel, the Israel within Israel continues. “There is,” he says, “a remnant *chosen by grace*” (Rom

¹ Trapp, *Commentary*, V:506.

11:5). The godly line, from Isaac to Jacob to the Apostle Paul continues. He then adds this clarifying comment:

But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. (Rom 11:6)

Election is “by grace” and not “on the basis of works,” not on the basis of any virtue of the chosen ones either seen or foreseen. If the believing line had been chosen on the basis of some virtue in it, seen or foreseen, “grace would no longer be grace.” The principle of grace can only be guarded from merit if God freely chooses apart from any criteria found in the chosen ones. What separates the elect from the non-elect is not meritorious or deserving virtues, rather, God’s grace. He affirms the *freedom of God* to extend or withhold mercy and compassion as He pleases. This is not a matter of justice, but of mercy. If it were a matter of justice, then God would be obligated and grace destroyed. The graciousness of the gospel rests on the foundation of God’s sovereign election. God owes no one anything; therefore, when He shows mercy it is all of His own sovereign grace. The Apostle cites Exodus 33:19 in 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.” (Rom 9:15)

He then makes his point explicit:

So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. (Rom 9:16)

God affirms His freedom to do as He pleases: ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.’ It is His sole and sovereign prerogative to extend and withhold mercy. The Apostle repeats the same principle a second time. ‘I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ God’s decision is not calculated on the basis of human decisions (“human will”) or human efforts (“exertion”). God shows mercy when and to whom He is pleased to show it.

The Apostle then cites another historical example, that of Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus.

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” (Rom 9:17)

He raises up Pharaoh only that He might demonstrate His power by thrusting him down again (citing Ex 9:16). The Apostle affirms the freedom of God a third time:

So then he has mercy on whomever he wills and He hardens whomever he wills. (Rom 9:18)

God is free to show mercy to whomever and whenever He will and judiciously harden those who persist in sin. Remember, Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex 3:15, 32; 9:34) and then God hardened Pharaoh's heart judiciously (Ex 7:18; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 14:8).

The Apostle raises a second natural and common objection: how then can we be blamed?

“Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” (Rom 9:19)

How can there be any fault when God is all-powerful and once His choice is made, no one can thwart His purposes. Are we not, then, mere puppets? The Apostle's answer is instructive.

²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? (Rom 9:20, 21)

He refuses to answer the question that he has raised on our behalf. His answer is to say, we have walked right up to the line of impertinence and now we have to back off. We must not presume to sit in judgement of God. “Who are you, O man, to answer back to God” (9:20)? Remarkably he likens us to the inanimate objects that are molded by the molder and to the simple substance, the clay, that is shaped by the potter. Let's not flatter ourselves. He is the potter and we have not even the characteristics of puppets: we are but clay with which God can do whatever He pleases. He has the “right,” the prerogative, the freedom to do what He pleases with us all.

Lessons

The first lesson that we should learn from this discussion is *humility*. When the finite are dealing with the infinite, we should know that we can only progress in understanding so far. If we could understand everything about God, He would not be the infinite and eternal God of the Bible. Rather, He would be the limited God of our own imagination. Our responsibility is to affirm what He affirms about Himself in His word and leave unsaid the “secret things” that belong to Him (Deut 29:29).

None of the foregoing is a denial of human responsibility or what the *Westminster Confession of Faith* calls the reality of “second causes.” All the Bible assumes and teaches that we are both responsible *and* accountable for our actions. Indeed, in the next chapter the Apostle Paul will declare, “*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:13). He affirms the necessity of sending preachers so that the unbelieving have the opportunity to hear and believe: “How are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?” (Rom 10:14, 15). We are responsible to send, to go, and to believe. The Apostle does not attempt to reconcile the freedom of God with human responsibility and neither should we. He does not attempt to reconcile God’s freedom with ours. We affirm both. In the end, we can only say with the Apostle as he concludes the discussion of Romans 9-11,

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?” (Rom 11:33-35)

God’s ways are “inscrutable,” His judgments “unsearchable.” “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa 55:8).

That one citation of Romans 9:15 at my parents’ dinner table was my first brush with the sovereignty of God. It effected in me an openness, a receptivity to what I was later to learn was the Augustinian and Calvinistic tradition, and what we might call a “high” view of God. I would learn that God is independent, self-existent, self-sufficient, and self-determining. He lacks nothing. He needs nothing. He is not “served by human hands, *as though he needed anything*” (Acts 17:25). “Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” (Rom 11:35). No one. He lacks nothing, needs nothing, and answers to no one. From the point of that conversation onward, I was receptive to the doctrines of providence, election, and predestination, and didn’t flinch when I encountered them in Romans 8:28-11:36, Ephesians 1:3-11, 1 Peter 1:12, 2 Peter 1:10, John 6, especially verses 37, 44, and 65, John 10:27-30, and so on.

On the eve of my departure to England to study theology, I spent the day at Santa Monica beach reading J. I. Packer’s introduction to John Owen’s great work, *The Death of Death and the Death of Christ*. I was jolted, but given my exposure to Romans 9:15, not surprised. When Packer claimed that we have “lost our grip on the biblical gospel,” I sat up and took notice. When he

contrasted the “new gospel” with the “old gospel” and claimed that the former “conspicuously fails to produce deep reverence, deep repentance, deep humility, a spirit of worship, a concern for the church”; that it “fails to make men God-centred in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts”; that it “is too exclusively concerned to be ‘helpful’ to man –to bring peace, comfort, happiness, satisfaction –and too little concerned to glorify God,” his claims resonated with me.² When he claimed that the old biblical gospel,

was always and essentially a proclamation of Divine sovereignty in mercy and judgment, a summons to bow down and worship the mighty Lord on whom man depends for all good, both in nature and in grace. Its centre of reference was unambiguously God;³

His assertions stirred my soul. When we grasp the freedom of God, it humbles us.

The second lesson came over time in the *practice of worship*. From that point onward I instinctively sensed that the “big” God I was coming to know required a “big” worship. That is, the shallow, casual, borderline flippant worship of my youth and college years was inadequate. A much more serious, solemn, sober, reverent worship was necessary for so great, so sovereign, so incomprehensible God as the God of the Bible.

² J. I. Packer, *Introductory Essay to John Owen's The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (London: Banner of Truth, 1958 reprint), 2.

³ Ibid.

“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.” Our inherently idolatrous selves would like a god that we can control through ritual, ceremony, and sacrifice. We’d like a god whose actions are predictable and benefits obligated. Instead, the Bible presents us with a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent; who is good and does good; who is holy, righteous, and the judge of all the earth; who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and who does whatever He pleases (Ps 135:6). Before Him, we can only bow and worship.