

# GOOD NEWS FOR ALL OF US

## WEEK SEVEN: Romans 9:1-29

### Romans Good News for All of Us: A Brief Introduction

Paul's epistle to the Romans is the most influential of his letters and has had an enormous impact on Christian theology and doctrine. Part of the reason is that it is the most systematic of Paul's letters; outlining as clearly as in any of his writings his understanding of the good news about Jesus. One consequence has been that Romans has been treated like a systematic theology rather than as an occasional document; one written to address a specific pastoral occasion. Romans, like all of Paul's letters, has a concrete situation that he is wanting to address. Scholars agree that there is evidence of division in the Roman church. The upshot of this is that the doctrine which dominates the first two-thirds of the letter is less an overview of Paul's thought and more of a foundation for the exhortations in the final chapters. In order to better understand the doctrine, we will benefit from better understanding the pastoral issues that Paul is hoping to address. To that end, we will be working through Romans backwards; seeking clarity about the concerns Paul has and then exploring the doctrinal foundations.

I have included an outline of the series and a brief bibliography at the end of this document.

### Sermon Outline:

#### A Brief Overview of This Week's Sermon

**Key Text(s):** Romans 9:1-29

We are working our way backwards through the epistle on the premise that Paul is doing local, pastoral theology – addressing a situation in the Roman church – throughout the letter. The better we understand the situation he is addressing the better equipped we will be to navigate the doctrinally rich opening chapters. And what we have seen is that Paul is addressing a community that is beginning to fracture along the Jew/Gentile faultline.

In this, our second instalment in Romans, we are looking at chapter 9-11 which forms a critical transition to the practical, ethical instructions Paul ends the letter with. This section deals with the question, "Who are the people of God?" with a special emphasis on Israel. There are two important implications. First, this must be read with the relational context in mind. This is not abstract theological reflection on a vexed issue, but theology with a purpose (which all good theology must be!). Second, Paul is not discussing personal salvation in this section. This is particularly important because this section contains a number of theological 'trigger terms' often associated with predestination (e.g., election). While salvation is part of the identity of the people of God, it is not the full story. The overarching narrative is about God's purposes for his people (which is, of course, much more aligned to the pastoral issue Paul is addressing!).

There are a couple of other features of this section that are worth noting. First, that this is a very personal appeal. Paul uses the first person pronoun, "I", twenty-seven times in these three chapters (only seven in Romans 1:18-8:39). Second, Paul makes extensive use of the Old Testament in these chapters. Nearly one-third of all the OT references

found in all of Paul's letters are found in these three! This suggests that this section is primarily addressed to the Jewish believers; those who would appreciate and understand the OT references.

With this background in mind, let's have a look at this first section: 9:1-29.

Paul pivots from the glorious heights of 8:31-39 (one of the more well-known and loved passages in all of Scripture) to the question of Israel. While Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles he was also a Jew and was deeply anguished by the Jewish rejection of Jesus. In his declaration that he would wish himself cursed for their sake he not only demonstrates the depth of his feelings, but also parallels Moses' appeal to the Lord for Israel after the Golden Calf incident (Exodus 32:33). He outlines the many advantages that the people of Israel have before addressing four questions.

The first is implied – Has God's word to Israel failed? To this, Paul says, 'No'. And the reason? Because ethnicity was never the central characteristic of God's people. To prove his point Paul refers to four Old Testament passages and two of the patriarchal stories. Both Abraham and Isaac had two sons, but biological descent was not a guarantee that they would be the people of God. Instead, it was God's promise that was determinative.

The final OT reference in this section is from Malachi 1:2, 3 and reminds us that this is about the people of God as a group, rather than individual salvation. 'Esau' and 'Jacob' stand in for the people of Edom and Israel and the 'love'/'hatred' of God is not about emotion but about his blessing upon them.

This leads to a second question. "Is God unjust?" Again Paul declares, 'No!' For God's choice is aligned to both his character – to show mercy – and to his purposes in the world – to restore all things. This cuts both ways. In mercy to his people (and the first OT quotation in this section is from Exodus 33:19, the Golden Calf incident – that great apostasy of Israel) and in hardening of those who are not (in this case Pharaoh).

The third question follows on from this. "They why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?" To this Paul turns to another OT concept – that of the potter and the clay. In the NIV/UK there are two possible texts Paul may have in mind: Isaiah 29:16 and 45:9. The first of these refers to the rejection of his people (Israel) and the second to the pagan king Cyrus whom God used to show his mercy. This flips the script from the previous section and reminds the Romans (and especially the Jews) that God's sovereignty extends over all the earth.

Finally, Paul addresses one more question. What if God did this – hardening some – to demonstrate his great mercy to his people, "even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?" (9:24) To this thought Paul adds four more OT references. The first two from Hosea speak of Israel's rejection of the Lord and his determination to call a people from them nonetheless. The latter two refer more specifically to the remnant of Israel (an important concept in the exilic period of Israel); a preserved group to whom God's promises remained in effect and through whom he would accomplish his purposes in the world.

The argument is far from done – we still have two chapters to go – but there are a couple of things to note in terms of application. First, Paul began by listing the advantages of Israel. These were, quite likely, a source of pride for the Jewish Christians. Without disparaging these advantages Paul makes very clear that they are not why the Jewish Christians have been accepted. They are part of God's people because of God's mercy! Therefore, they cannot use their advantages as a set of hurdles for the Gentiles. They have received the law, but are not part of God's people because they have obeyed it! This has to do with welcoming Gentile believers with humility due to God's goodness.

To the Gentile believers, who may have begun to despise the Jewish reliance and insistence upon their advantages, Paul reminds them that their story – the story of God's people – is grounded in the story of Israel. They cannot ignore their Jewish heritage (so to speak) but must recognise the debt that they owe to their Jewish brothers and sisters.

If you think ahead (or behind given that we've already looked at it!) to the question of table fellowship, you can see how Paul is preparing for that conversation. The matter of clean and unclean food was an important part of Jewish identity and it was in the law of God. It was not, however, the eating of clean and unclean food that made them the people of God. Therefore, the Jews should be prepared to eat with Gentiles as family even if the food wasn't 'clean' and the Gentiles should be prepared to eat 'clean' food with their Jewish family.

Let us consider how we might be more welcoming to those around us as we continue to explore Paul's argument.

## Questions to Ask

1. Paul speaks with deep personal anguish over Israel's rejection of Jesus. What does this reveal about his heart, and what can we learn from his example about caring for people who do not share our faith?
2. The sermon emphasizes that Romans 9 is about the identity of God's people, not simply individual salvation. How does that broader focus change the way we read this passage?
3. Paul argues that belonging to the people of God has never been based merely on ethnicity or heritage, but on God's promise and mercy. Why would this have been especially important for both Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome?
4. One of Paul's major concerns is humility within a divided church. In what ways can spiritual advantages, traditions, or background become a source of pride in the church today?
5. The sermon highlights the need for both Jewish and Gentile believers to welcome one another as family. What barriers to welcome and unity do you see in Christian communities today, and how might the gospel challenge them?
6. The section ends by inviting us to consider how we might be more welcoming to those around us. What is one practical way our group or church could grow in humility, hospitality, and unity this week?

### A Prayer to Pray

Continue to pray for the unity of our community of faith. In particular, pray that we might more and more deeply understand the mercy of God as the foundation of our unity.

### A Practice to Try

Choose one of the first steps you identified in Q. 6 above and implement it this week.

### Readings to Read This Week

Have a look at some of the passages that Paul quotes in this section and consider how they deepen our appreciation of Paul's argument.

1. Exodus 32-33
2. Hosea 1-3
3. Isaiah 29:13-24
4. Isaiah 45
5. Isaiah 10:20-34

### A Mission Commitment to Reflect on

One of our values is to be Others-Focused. The unity of the body of Christ is a mission-critical matter. Putting others first, serving them, and seeking to demonstrate our love for one another are all things we can do to strengthen our unity.

### A GBC Initiative to Promote/Celebrate

Each week we will provide you with a key aspect of our community news that we would encourage you to remind your Life Group about.

1. Please continue to pray for the Alpha course that continues until the 21st June.

### Good News For All of Us – Sermon Series outline

Please note that this is subject to change, but as it stands right now...

Term 1 (Romans 12-16)	Term 2 (Romans 9-11)	Term 3 (Romans 1-4)	Term 4 (Romans 5-8)
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15/2	Romans 16	7/6	9:1-29	23/8	TBD	25/10	TBD
22/2	15:14-33	14/6	9:30-10:21	30/8	TBD	1/11	TBD
1/3	14:1-15:13	21/6	11:1-24	6/9	TBD	8/11	TBD
8/3	12:14-13:7	28/6	11:25-36	13/9	TBD	15/11	TBD
15/3	Baptism			20/9	TBD	22/11	TBD
22/3	12:1-13					29/11	TBD
29/3	13:8-14						
5/4	Easter						

## A Brief Bibliography

The following commentaries have been utilised in the preparation and delivery of this series.

Bird, Michael, 2016, *Romans*, Story of God Bible Commentary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Gorman, Michael J., 2022, *Romans: A theological and pastoral commentary*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

McKnight, Scot, 2019, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas.

Witherington, Ben III, 2004, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan.