**Romans**

***How to be a Christian without Being Religious!***

**Lesson 16: God’s Sovereign Choice (Romans 9:1-33)**

Let’s begin by reviewing the many theological truths found in Romans 1-8:

* *For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith… This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe* (1:17; 3:22). Salvation comes by faith alone in Christ alone to all who believe. This is the simple gospel. When a man hears and believes the gospel, God credits him with his perfect righteousness.
* *There is no one righteous, not even one…no one…seeks God. All have turned away…there is no one who does good, not even one…for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (3:10-12, 23).We are all sinners who must be clothed in the righteousness of God before we will ever see heaven.
* *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin* (3:20). The law was never meant to save anyone, nor can it. The law was given to reveal our sin and lead us to Christ.
* *What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness”* (4:3). The gospel is not new; it was revealed to Abraham centuries before the birth of Christ (Galatians 3:8). Old Testament saints were saved in the same manner as New Testament saints—they believed the gospel and God credited it to them as righteousness.
* *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (5:8). This is the gospel. Christ died for sinners, and his death was an expression of the love that God has for the world (John 3:16).
* *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* (6:23). Sin results in death. Belief results in life. Jesus came into this world to offer the free gift of eternal life to all who believe.
* *We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life* (6:4). Through the believer’s union with Christ by faith, he is given a brand new life to live in Christ.
* *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do: no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing* (7:18-19). The Christian life is not easy. There is a war taking place within every believer—the ongoing battle between the sinful nature and the spiritual nature. Oftentimes, it may seem like a losing battle, which is why Paul says, *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!* (7:24-25). In what or Whom is the believer’s hope? Paul provides the answer in chapter 8.
* *You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you* (8:9). Believers have the Spirit of God living within them to help them win this internal battle. The Spirit is the power of the gospel to which Paul referred in chapter 1. The Spirit has the power both to give life and to win spiritual battles. Thus, Christians can and should live victoriously in this new found power.
* *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is Christ Jesus our Lord* (8:38-39). In other words—once saved, always saved. When God rescues a man from the dominion of darkness and brings him into the kingdom of the Son he loves (Colossians 1:13), nothing can reverse it. *For those God foreknew he also predestined…And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified* (8:29-30). When God calls a man to belong to him, that calling stands forever. Believers have been adopted into God’s family. And, once you belong to the family, you belong forever. Nothing can ever separate you from God’s love—not even death.

These are some of the most important truths we need to understand about authentic Christianity. Christianity is not about what *we do*; it’s about what *God has already done* for us. Those who believe they are saved as a result of church membership or denomination have missed the point. In addition, those who point to baptism, confirmation, or beliefs in creeds and denominational doctrines have also missed the point. They are just like the Jews of Paul’s day who believed that their association with the Temple and their identification with Abraham through circumcision guaranteed their inclusion in God’s family. But, they too missed the point. All religions miss the point. Keep in mind that Christianity is not a *religion*. It is a *relationship* with the God who created us, which brings us to Romans 9-11. In these three chapters, Paul takes us into the deep end of the theological swimming pool. Before you dive in, you need to understand that we are delving into the mysterious, infinite mind of God, and our finite minds are not capable of understanding God completely. Scripture tells us,

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Thus, we must approach Romans 9-11 with great humility. Remember, God is God, and we are not. We must humbly accept some truths that we *do not* understand and *will not* understand until heaven. And so, let’s begin to swim in the deep end. Paul begins,

*I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.* (Verses 1-5)

If anyone should have recognized Jesus when he appeared on the world stage, it was the Jews. They had been given every benefit. First, they were chosen from among all the people groups in the world to be God’s very own people. Deuteronomy 14:2 confirms, “Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.” In addition, God’s Shekinah glory (the manifestation of his presence) was with the Israelites as they fled from Egypt and, later, as they wandered throughout the desert for forty years. Furthermore, God’s glory was present in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple (Exodus 16:7, 10; 29:42-46; 1 Kings 8:10-11). Moreover, God established covenants with their ancestors, Abraham (Genesis 15:17-21; 17:1-8), Moses (Exodus 19:5; 24:1-4), and David (2 Samuel 7; 23:5), thereby establishing a relationship with them. Many OT prophecies and promises were given to the Jews concerning the coming of a Messiah (Genesis 3:15; 49:10; Psalm 2:2-7; 16:9-10; 22; Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; Micah 5:2). This Messiah, the Christ, came from the very line of Abraham. Thus, Jesus was Jewish. And yet, when Jesus lived among the Jews, they rejected him. We read, “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). How could this be? Here in Romans 9, Paul expresses great sorrow over the fact that his very own people, the Jews, did not believe Jesus was who he claimed to be. And Paul, perhaps more than anyone else, understood because at one time he had not believed. Now Paul was willing to give up his own salvation if only his Jewish brothers would believe. But most would not!

Paul turns to address those who would claim God’s promises to Israel had failed. God had promised to bless Israel, but the Jews of Paul’s day felt rejected by God. Though they were living in the land God had given them, they were dominated by the Romans. What happened to God’s promise of blessing? Let’s consider Paul’s response to this anticipated question regarding God’s word. Paul writes, “It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (verse 6). To understand Paul’s meaning, you must understand that there have always been two Israels—Abraham’s physical descendants and Abraham’s spiritual descendants. Paul continues,

*Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.”* (Verses 7-9)

Paul loved Israel; no one wanted Abraham’s descendants to understand the gospel more than he. Sadly, for many, Paul’s message fell on deaf ears (Matthew 13:11-15). God’s blessings were always intended for *true Israel*—the children of the promise. The question is: Who are God’s true children? The answer—the spiritual descendants of Abraham—those who are born supernaturally, just like Isaac. The “children of the promise” are those, whether Jews or Gentiles, who are born the unnatural way, by faith. Abraham’s spiritual descendants, both believing Jews and believing Gentiles, became God’s adopted children. Therefore, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote, “*If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise”* (3:29).

Still there is more to understand about the children of the promise. Paul continues,

*Not only that, but Rebekah’s children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that* ***God’s purpose in election might stand****: not by works, but by him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”* (Verses 10-13)

What in the world does Paul mean by *God’s purpose in election*? Well, he means exactly what he wrote. Remember, Paul, like all other writers of the NT, wrote under the influence of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Paul’s words were God’s words (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Through Paul, God informs us that he chose Jacob over Esau to belong to him before either had been born. Thus, his election (choosing of Jacob) had nothing to do with anything Jacob had or had not done. The phrase *not by works but by him who calls* may seem unfair, so Paul responds,

*What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?* (Verses 14-21)

The bottom line is: God is God, and we are not! God can do whatever he desires. Paul explains that the basis for his election is his mercy. In other words, the only reason any of us is saved is because of God’s mercy. Our salvation has nothing to do with justice. If we got what we deserved, no one would be saved. But God chose to act in eternity past when, out of his mercy, he called (elected) some to become his true children—those who believe as did Abraham, thus, become Abraham’s true children. If you have a problem with this, remember he is the potter, and we are the clay. Stott explains,

*So God is not unjust. The fact is, as Paul demonstrated in the early chapters of his letter, that all human beings are sinful and guilty in God’s sight (3:9, 19), so that nobody deserves to be saved. If therefore God hardens some, he is not being unjust, for that is what their sin deserves. If, on the other hand, he has compassion on some, he is not being unjust, for he is dealing with them in mercy. The wonder is not that some are saved and others not, but that anybody is saved at all. For we deserve nothing at God’s hand but judgment. If we receive what we deserve (which is judgment), or if we receive what we do not deserve (which is mercy), in neither case is God unjust. If therefore anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God’s. This antinomy* [a contradiction between two apparently equally valid principles] *contains a mystery which our present knowledge cannot solve; but it is consistent with Scripture, history and experience. [[1]](#footnote-1)*

The mystery of God’s divine election will never be understood this side of heaven. So, don’t get too bogged down with this. We can go only as far as the limits set by Scripture. Paul continues,

*What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?* (Verses 22-24)

God is patient with everyone. Scripture confirms, “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance”(2 Peter 3:9b).

It is interesting to note that the Greek verb used in the phrase *prepared for destruction* is a reflexive active verb. Thus, it means: the objects of God’s wrath *prepared themselves* for destruction. Unbelievers are actively involved in preparing themselves for their eventual destruction. Recall from Romans 1 that God gives them over to their own sinful desires. The mystery in this surrounds God’s sovereignty. Go back to v. 17: *For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”*

God is Someone to be feared. He is a God of wrath and judgment, and one day God is going to display his wrath and power for the whole world to see. However, we presently live in the era of grace. Here’s the interesting part: As unbelievers turn more and more away from God in open defiance and rebellion (as seen every day in our country), God chooses to exercise great patience. The reason for this is that he will eventually display his glory to the objects of his mercy. Paul tells us that God’s glory will be revealed in the outpouring of his wrath against those who have hardened their hearts to the gospel. Doesn’t this give you pause? Doesn’t this cause some fear of God to well up within your soul? Jesus said in Matthew 10:28, “*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”* God is to be feared, to some degree, by everyone. Keller simplifies, *In summary, in election God comes in, softens our hearts and makes us good. In hardening, God simply passes over and lets people have the way they have chosen.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

God is sovereign. He is in total control of world history as well as the events in individual nations and peoples. Paul continues,

*As he says in Hosea: “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,” and, “It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’” Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.” It is just as Isaiah said previously: “Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.”* (Verses 25-29)

Through both Hosea and Isaiah, God foretold exactly how two groups of people would respond to the gospel—the vast majority of Jews would reject it, while a great multitude of Gentiles would believe. Truly, God is sovereign. Do we not see these prophecies to be true in our world today? Romans 9 concludes,

*What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as it if were by works. They stumbled over the “stumbling stone.” As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.* (Verses 30-33)

The Jews have always been very religious and have prided themselves in their religion. Likewise, today we see many Gentiles who are religious and lost. As Paul has clearly explained, salvation comes by faith, not by works. Many religious people have a problem with Jesus and the cross. They do not understand how some man who died on a cross nearly 2,000 years ago has any relevance to their lives today, so they pursue a righteousness of works. They join churches, recite liturgies, go through confirmation, do good deeds, etc. It all becomes a religious treadmill. Religion says, “Do!” Jesus says, “Done!” Do you see the difference? Religious people stumble over the “stumbling stone.” *But anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame!* Have you placed your trust in Jesus and in his death on the cross as payment for your sins? If not, why not do so now? The choice is yours! And when you choose Jesus, you will realize that he chose you first.

**DAY 1**

1. Read chapter 7, pages 85-89, in *How to Be a Christian without Being Religious*.
   1. Ridenour refers to chapters 9-11 as a “parenthesis” in which Paul deals with a major problem, the rejection of God’s plan of salvation in Christ by his own kinsmen—the Jews. However, according to Ridenour “a major girder” is established in understanding the difference between Christianity and religion. How does he explain the difference?
   2. (Challenge question) Ridenour states, “God knew before Esau was born how he would act and what he would do. On the basis of such careless behavior by Esau, God rejected him.” Would Paul agree with this statement (Romans 9:10-13)? Explain your answer.
   3. According to Ridenour, what is the miracle?

**DAY 2 Read Romans 9:1-5.**

1. Answer the following questions based on Romans 9:1-4a.
   1. What must Paul have believed about the spiritual condition of most of the Jews of his era?
   2. How did Paul feel towards them—the people of Israel?
   3. Read Luke 11:34 and 19:41-42. How was Jesus’ view of the Israelites similar to that of Paul? What were Jesus’ feelings towards the Jews?
2. Answer the following questions based on Romans 9:4-5.
   1. What were some of the many privileges that the people of Israel enjoyed over other people?
   2. What will be demanded of those who have been given much (Luke 12:48b)?
   3. What spiritual privileges have you been given? What sort of accountability do you think God expects of you?

**DAY 3 Read Romans 9:6-13.**

1. Answer the following questions based on Romans 9:6-13.
   1. Explain what is meant by “two Israel’s.”
   2. To which Israel do you belong and why?
   3. Read Hebrews 11:11-12, along with Genesis 17:15-19 and 21:1-7. Explain the kind of birth Sarah had (natural vs. supernatural).
   4. Read Galatians 4:21-31. Paul is teaching a difficult concept. God promised Abraham many descendants. Those descendants would come not by man’s work (Hagar/Ishmael) but by God’s work (Sarah/Isaac). It is the “children of the promise” that are reckoned, or regarded, as God’s true children. Explain.
   5. Explain this phrase: *in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works, but by him who calls* .

* *God’s purpose in election might stand*
* *not by works*
* *but by him who calls*

Stott expounds,

*Many mysteries surround the doctrine of election, and theologians are unwise to systematize it in such a way that no puzzles, enigmas or loose ends are left. At the same time, in addition to the arguments developed in the exposition of Romans 8:28-30, we need to remember two truths. First, election is not just a Pauline or apostolic doctrine; it was also taught by Jesus himself. “I know those I have chosen,” he said. Secondly, election is an indispensable foundation of Christian worship, in time and eternity. It is the essence of worship to say: “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory.” If we were responsible for our own salvation, either in whole or even in part, we would be justified in singing our own praises and blowing our own trumpet in heaven. But such a thing is inconceivable. God’s redeemed people will spend eternity worshipping him, humbling themselves before him in grateful adoration, ascribing their salvation to him and to the Lamb, and acknowledging that he alone is worthy to receive all praise, honour and glory. Why? Because our salvation is due entirely to his grace, will, initiative, wisdom and power.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

**DAY 4 Read Romans 9:14-19.**

1. Salvation is based not on God’s justice but his mercy. Explain.
2. Define the mercy of God in your own words.
3. How did God use Pharaoh to display his glory and power to the known world at that time (Exodus 14, 15:13-18)?
4. Verse 18 states, *Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.*
   1. Do you have a problem with this? If yes, why?
   2. What is Paul’s answer to those who have a problem with God doing as he pleases?
5. Is it okay to come to God with questions?

**DAY 5**  **Read Romans 9:22-33.**

1. Answer the following questions based on Romans 9:22-33.
   1. Read Genesis 6:1-8 and 2 Peter 3:9. Has God been patient with the world? If yes, why?
   2. Do you think God will someday reach the end of his patience? If yes, what do you think God will do at that time? (Revelation 19:11-16)
   3. Explain how God, in displaying his wrath and power against unbelievers (the objects of his wrath), will make “the riches of his glory” known to believers (the objects of his mercy)?
2. How have the prophecies of both Hosea and Isaiah come true? What does this tell you about God’s word?
3. How have many Gentiles and some Jews obtained righteousness? Explain your answer.
4. How have many Jews and Gentiles failed to obtain righteousness?
5. *They stumbled over the “stumbling stone.” As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”* (Verses 32c-33)
   1. Why is Jesus a “stumbling stone” to so many Jews today (Deuteronomy 21:22-23; Galatians 3:13)?
   2. Why is Jesus a “stumbling stone” to so many Gentiles today (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)?
6. What is the most important truth you learned in your study of Romans 9?

1. Stott, 269-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Keller, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stott, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)