

God's Mercy

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, so we're going back to Romans chapter 9 this morning. I'm going to do something that I've not done before in this church or in any church actually. I am going to ask you to put your hands up if you think that was probably the hardest chapter that you've ever read in the Bible. Put your hands up if you think that. Well, you are truly free church. So either you're uncomfortable putting your hands up, you aren't listening to the reading or you are the greatest minds in spiritual history of the church. I'll freely admit I find this probably, if not the, not one of the most, the most difficult chapter in the Bible. I simply don't believe you if you don't think it's hard because it is, it has to be hard for us to understand this chapter. Can I just give a little bit of introduction and I'll say a little bit of what I'm not going to say and then I'll try and wallow around in the mud of my own incompetence but seeking the Spirit of God to bring some hope and light and inspiration into this great and wonderful truth that we have before us. Can I just say that we've finished, we've just, we've moved from, we had four, we did four sermons on chapter eight because I was kind of arguing that that was one of the best chapters in the Bible. It's like the hub in a sense, like to the whole Bible is as we understand chapter eight and that we are not condemned, that we are adopted, we are children of God and how important that is and how significant, how that changes everything, our perspective and everything we are and so we spent a long time on it and then we come to this which is probably the most difficult chapter but it comes as a parenthesis, okay. In other words, you could go from the end of chapter eight to the beginning of chapter twelve and miss out eight, nine, ten and eleven and you would still get a really clear flow from the book of Romans. It's almost as if nine to eleven is added in as an extra parenthesis, as if Paul gets distracted, he's doing this marvelous chapter and then he, well, wait a minute and he thinks of something and he spends three chapters in this parenthesis speaking about it and really what he's speaking about, he's been talking about God's promises and of course that's with an Old Testament background to the people of Israel and he says, wait a minute, Israel's rejected God, nearly all of Israel and the people of, the Jewish people have rejected God, therefore has God's promises failed to them and that comes up with something that he thinks is really important and he can imagine his readers and the people in the church asking that question, well, is God really true or his promises right because, well, there's hardly any Jewish people who have come to faith, what about all the promises to Abraham? What about all the promises of faith to this great people? And so he spends these three chapters really speaking about

God, God's sovereignty and what it means for the people, what it means to be Israel and what it means to be descendants of Abraham and that actually includes us. But I'm not going to spend a lot of time on that argument today because I'm going to leave that for Thomas and because it goes on to the next two chapters, the whole promise, I will mention it briefly, I just want to do an overview this morning on what it means, what this chapter means as it explains the sovereignty of God in dealing with Israel and in dealing with everyone and what the consequences are. You can read a chapter like that and think, this is for me, this is incomprehensible. Now, you know, you can accept and believe its truth, but logically we wrestle with that, I certainly do. The facts of a chapter like this can leave people wanting to take it out of the Bible or wanting to change it so that fits into our thinking. The facts can leave potentially us confused and angry. What is God who chooses everything? We can't do anything about it all. It's all fixed beforehand. Everything is fixed. God who hates, God who hardens, God who makes and then breaks this divine potter who just does his own thing. Is that the kind of God that we have come to believe in and understand and know through Jesus Christ our Lord? Is this not speaking about the reality that therefore we are just puppets? It does appear at first reading fatalistic, deterministic theology that there's nothing we can do. It's all foreordained. Everything will come to pass.

We have no freedom and no control. Can we just then sit back today and say, well, if I'm chosen, I'm chosen and I'll just wait for God to do His great work. And I'm damned otherwise and there's nothing I can do about it. How is it that Paul can speak in this way about, we don't understand this kind of concept. I don't like it. How can I be guilty if the decisions have been made beforehand about who is chosen and who is not? Worse than that. And it's often been used as a reason in our own denomination and our own, maybe not, I shouldn't say that so pointedly, but maybe in our theological background, mission is then a waste of time. Why bother with mission? Why bother with telling people about the gospel?

Mission's a waste of time. God will choose whom He will choose. We'll just sit back, the doors are open, people can come in. And those whom God has chosen, He will bring. God will save who He will save. Okay. Please stay with me to the end, mentally and spiritually and prayerfully. First thing I want to say is, you can't make this up. You can't make this up. I'm speaking the truth in Christ, Paul says. I am not lying. My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit. He is declaring truth as He has done and as the Word of God throughout does. It is the declarative word that He gives based on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets which we've been looking at in the evening. We can't make it up, but it is not convenient truth. I'll give you that. It's not convenient truth, but often the truth is not, is it, for His honesty and the honesty of God's Word often troubles us. We always look for and want the bits that we can cope with, the bits that we can accept, the bits we can see and share without a reaction. But yet here we have a recognition that the

[7 : 29] Word of God is a package. It comes as a one. And it's not just Paul that taught about the sovereignty of God. It is laced throughout the whole of Scripture. And Jesus Himself taught about election John chapter 13 and verse 18. I am not speaking of all of you.

I know whom I have chosen, but the Scripture will be fulfilled. He ate my bread, has lifted His heel against me. And then Mark chapter 13 verse 27. Jesus speaking about the end of time and says, Then He will send out His angels and gather His elect from the four winds from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. Jesus spoke about this sovereign choice of God. The danger for us, please follow me to the end, the danger can be that we conform the gospel and God until it becomes no gospel and no God, a God that we cannot worship.

Because if the truth is outside of ourselves, which we believe, the truth is that Christ and God is revealing, I am the way, the truth and the life, the truth is outside of us.

It will always challenge our closed systems of thought. We will always be challenged if the truth is outside of us. And you would simply, you would simply in a closed system of thought, you would simply not make up a God like this. You would not make up a God who makes us so uncomfortable at this level and beyond our understanding. You say, But I believe in freedom. I believe in making my own decisions. I want to think for myself.

But that broader, wider question is always without truth, without a God. Are you really free? Are you? Are you free to live your own life, your own way? Even if you could, would there be purpose in it? Will you dream, dreams be fulfilled? Would you find meaning? Would you overcome pain and loss and identity? Would you be able to live and not die? To what do you give your life? What is the core of the, what do you give your energy to in life? Does it give you freedom or does it enslave you? Will it die for you? Will it love you? Will it give you what you hope for? Which is to live in peace and forgiveness and hope? Freedom is a very interesting concept. We don't have more time to look into that whole idea this morning. You can't make it up. And what we recognize from here also from lots of other parts of Scripture that we've sung about God being holy, that means He's set apart.

[10 : 23] That means He's different. So what we don't do is we don't take ourselves and we don't take ourselves and put ourselves on the table and then make a really fine image of ourselves, the best kind of human we can be. Well, that's quite like God. That's what we want God's like, just the best of all that we are. Because it's not that God is not like us. We recognize there's mystery in the character and the person of God, verse 5 says, you know, that God who is overall, that throwaway comment, God is overall, there's mystery because He's overall.

We simply can't understand all of God and you are unable to worship if you fully understand. Is that right? There can be no transcendence, there can be no adoration, you can't fall at your feet. If you have every nook and cranny of God revealed and seen and you know everything about Him, then you become God. We become gods if we can know all there is to know about God and of course that is in the sense, He's eternal, He's transcendent, He's a spirit, He's infinite. He blows our minds. There are places that we need to recognize, we simply can't go because we can't go. It's not that the road is barred, we don't have the mental capacity to go there. We simply need to recognize that there is mystery in God and there is sovereignty in God, He does what He chooses. We find that so difficult, He does what He chooses because He is good and because He's sovereign and because He is all powerful, He does what He chooses. He is just, if He wasn't just and if He wasn't good then it would be hellish. We would be in a terrible place but because of who He is, He does what He chooses.

I have sovereignty and I don't have time to go into all of it obviously but it's the heart of the Gospel and Paul is really dealing with the Gospel here. In other words, it's about who He chooses to be Christians. That sounds terrible from that point of view, doesn't it? That God chooses those who become Christians but it fits in with the picture of our condition that we are spiritually dead. Dead people can't choose. We are spiritually dead. We can't make ourselves spiritually alive. He needs to do it. He needs to choose. He needs to bring life. That is why He gets the glory rather than, it's not shared, it's not that we sit down with God and say, okay God, you do 80%, I'll do 20% and we can share a little bit of the glory. It's not like that. He takes all the glory because He brings life to us.

It's not shared. If we don't get that, we don't get it. We don't get the Gospel. The glory is His. I think that's one of the reasons why the Bible or Jesus Himself chooses natural birth as an illustration of spiritual birth. He says, John 3.16, you must be born again.

He uses that spiritual illustration. Now it's not a perfect illustration for us but it is at one level like our physical birth, isn't it? You'd no choice about your physical birth.

[13 : 48] You were born. You weren't involved in the decision. You didn't ask to be born. You're entirely passive. Your will did not come into your being born at any level whatsoever. An immediately on birth or even in utero, you were the object of unconditional love of your parents. Before you'd done anything good or bad, you loved you. It was that unconditional love. Now I think it's imperfect but it is a helpful analogy. When we think of our relationship to God and Paul speaks about it in this chapter about his choices of Jacob and Esau and before they'd done anything good or bad, that he had chosen. He had chosen because he is in control. How could he be God otherwise? Could we worship someone who could be surprised or defeated or who had no control over others? He's the potter. Verse 20 speaks about him being the potter. We are those who are made by him. Can we really come back to him and say, this isn't how it should be? I think our 21st century mindset in a post-Christian world where for the first time in history there's no concept of a higher being in the culture. You find that very difficult. First culture since the beginning of time, which has had no concept of a higher being, a higher power, however you define that power. We're growing up in that culture and so, well some of us have grown up physically anyway a long time ago but it's there isn't it? That we struggle and many other cultures will not struggle that whole idea of divine power however it's revealed. It's a fatal blow to our pride and our wanted independence that there is this God. Now there are huge challenges in this chapter of course. Esau I have loved, he says, in verse 13, looking at the wrong one but as it is written Jacob I loved Esau I hated. That seems a strange thing for us to consider God making that choice with these kind of language but Jesus gives us an interpretive clue here because in Luke 14 verse 26, oh great they're on the same screen, well done.

That's what I wanted. Jesus says, you know, if anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes and even his own life he cannot be my disciple. What? Jesus is contradicting himself surely. He says love your parents and then in Matthew's Gospel he says whoever loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me and whoever loves son and daughter more than me is not worthy of me. So this Jacob, you know, I have hated, Jacob I loved Esau I hated. This is a Hebrew idiom basically for saying Jacob I loved Esau I loved less. It's an idiomatic phrase, it doesn't take away all the problems but nonetheless it helps us to understand a little bit. And the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in verse 18, very difficult for us, why God hardened Pharaoh's heart? Well if we look back to that passage we also see that Pharaoh hardened his own heart and that God comes in later and hardens his heart in a sense of judgment upon him. So there's personal responsibility of Pharaoh, come back to that.

So God's not like us, he's mysterious and there's mystery, there's sovereignty. There's also fulfilled promise in these three chapters. I'm not really going to spend much time on this but what he says in verse 6 helps to put it in context for not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring physically. So he's basically saying that the promises of the Old Testament made to Israel were made to, was a spiritual promise. It wasn't made necessarily or primarily to the physical descendants of Abraham although they had all the privileges and all the opportunities but that there is a sense in which, and Hebrews speaks about this in other parts of the New Testament, Romans speak about us being children of Abraham, every believer is a child of Abraham, a spiritual child of Abraham. So the promises are fulfilled in the spiritual seed of Israel or of Abraham, not necessarily the physical seed. Those who are God's people are not those who are God's people by physical generation, the people of Israel but they are those who, the Bible talks about being circumcised in their heart, you know, there's a spiritual circumcised, there's those who have changed in their hearts towards God. So he's not a liar, he has not failed, his promises that he gave to the people in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New Testament with the broadening of the covenant to all who are

Abrams descendants by faith but there will be more about that in the future chapters. God's not like us and his mystery is sovereignty in his fulfilled promise but also in his, I've described this as mercy unplugged. In verse 14 he speaks, talking about Moses, so he is mercy on whomever he wills and he heartens whomever he wills. Paul is his imaginary question, you know, well, is God just in what he's doing? And he answers it, he defends God justice by declaring his mercy and that's very important. There's nothing in ourselves that merits being chosen, we all justly deserve his wrath, all of us deserve his wrath but despite that he chooses and he chooses a number that can't be counted, huge number of people, that's what he chooses, he chooses in his mercy. It's not a common word that's used for mercy here, it's not the normal word that you, the Hebrew word which is hesed, which is the covenant and mercy of God which we know about in the Old Testament, it's Rahamin, the word that he uses and that is used very rarely and it's used almost exclusively of God and it's kind of emotional, deep-seated compassion moving to the bowels as it were, moving the innards compassionately. Its stem is the word Rahim which is the mother's womb, it's quite interesting really, that is the compassion of a mother giving birth, the compassion of a father for his children, that is what he does, he pours out his mercy on those who are undeserving at great immeasurable cost. So it's not that he simply makes the choice and says you here, you there, it's at great immeasurable cost, this is no distant potentate making a random choice which is what we sometimes think. This is the sovereign, powerful, electing God of mystery which we recognise becoming flesh, emptying himself of his glory, walking on dirt roads and being nailed to a tree in death in order that his sovereign choice can be fulfilled.

So whatever struggles we have with this, he is not dispassionate and he is not distant, his choice involved the unspeakable disruption of his character and personhood in the glorious love and trinity of the unity being ripped apart beyond cost, his choice was immeasurable cost for us. I like to also say just to close in this point on this area, I believe that there is reason for his choice, I don't believe it's random but it's not revealed, it's not revealed and it's not based on merit, that's all we could say, certainly not based on our merit but nothing God can do is without reason, he is not an unreasonable illogical God, he has mercy on whom he has mercy but it's not revealed on what basis he made choices but it is not on our merit. So God is not like us, the third thing very briefly is it's not all the truth, okay, when we look at chapters like this we need to remember it's not the whole of the truth because clearly the Bible reveals our own responsibility, that we are responsible before the sovereign God, okay, there's a thousand verses and teachings, there's examples throughout the Bible of our personal responsibility, we are moral beings, go on to Romans chapter 14 and verse 12 in the same letter Paul says, look each of us will give account of himself to God, so you and I will give account of ourselves to God because we're morally responsible beings, we are people who have choices to make and we are responsible before God and we will stand before him and so what we come to is we can't deny either stand, both are taught, both are parallel, some people say it's like a railway lines, they're both there, they both run parallel, they never join together but they're both there and they enable the world to move forward because of these two things and there's two great examples of it in the Bible of the two coming together and unashamedly being presented together, first, second Peter chapter 1, therefore brothers be all the more diligent to make your calling, what a ridiculous verse is it not, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure for if you practice these qualities you will never fail, there we have sovereignty of God and election right beside our own responsibility as is Philippians 2, 12 and 13, very well known verse therefore my beloved as you've always obeyed not now on the MacPraise but more perhaps since, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His only will, work out your own salvation, God is working in you, the two are unashamedly brought together and we simply are asked to recognize that it's an antinomy, an antinomy is a contradiction between two beliefs or conclusions that are themselves reasonable, a paradox which our present knowledge cannot solve, we cannot solve it but they are presented as a mystery before God so we either do one of two things as Paul speaks of at the end of this chapter in verses 32 and 33, we either stumble on Jesus Christ, we stumble on the truth of God or we believe, you know they have stumbled over the stumbling block and that's the Jewish people, so it is written, behold I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence whoever

[26 : 15] believes in Him will not be put to shame, so there is belief and trust or stumbling as we see, that's the only two responses to the living God as we seek Him out, Jesus never turns away anyone who seeks after Him who comes to Him, if you pray to Him, if you cry out, if you ask, if you say why do I understand but I trust you, that's the response that He is looking for in us that we believe and put our trust in His sovereign person but also in His amazing, remarkable work for us. If you are not Christian this morning, can I just say that this is an extremely difficult passage to wrestle with but can I say that if you are waiting until you get all the answers before you become a Christian, whether it is a matter theological like this or whether it is practical and issues in the world or maybe in your own heart, then you will never come because trust requires, trust doesn't it? It requires that we put our faith in one who is reasonable in whom we can believe, even though we don't understand them. The alternative is to stick with what you've got but God says only He can offer life, joy, peace and it's possible for us to stick our head in the sand and just leave it forever and ever and maybe particularly if you've been coming to church for a long, long time and you come from a tradition which maybe focused on the sovereignty of God against all others and think well I don't know if

I can ever come, I don't know if I can ever believe, I'll just need to wait until if I'm chosen I'm chosen. It's simply not a biblical reason, simply not a common sense reason for staying away because God makes clear that we are human responsibility to choose and that He is the God who also is the God of choice.

So as we've just finished very briefly, I just want to look back at, you know, take a, come away from the chapter and think well Paul wrote it inspired by God, given this truth but Paul gets it. That's the great thing, Paul gets this truth about God and that's a challenge for us and he gets it because he had met with Christ, the risen Christ.

You remember in the road to Damascus it changed everything, it changed his perspective, it changed his theology, it changed his faith, his trust, his joy, his love, his experience of forgiveness and hope and knowing Christ is what changed him. Knowing Christ is what helped him to see this and still live responsibly as a believer, it transformed him and as we learn about Christ through knowing him and entrusting ourselves to him, then we will find our response to a chapter like this changes. Because you would think if Paul who wrote this was talking about sovereignty and about God choosing and everything that he would just say, well my people have rejected, that's okay, that's God's choice, that's what happens.

That's not how he responds, see the opening verses of the chapter, they're amazing. He says, I'm speaking the truth in Christ, he says, I wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. He's begging as it were before God, he's no stoic. The sovereignty of God didn't make him an automaton when it came to his own people, he loved them, he wishes he could be their Savior, he wishes he could be damned in order that they could be saved because he loved them so much. He was no determinist theologically, he was not one of the frozen chosen, he had great passion and great love for his people and he wasn't lazy, he didn't sit back and say, well if that will be, the doors are open people might come in. He didn't say that. The promise of the great commission drove him on passionately and it's easy for us and in our tradition it's easy for us to hide behind our sovereign theology. Theology of a sovereign God says

[30 : 39] I can't care less, don't care less about anyone because God is sovereign. We're to be people who recognize prayerfully, longingly that we are to reach out with people and we're to share the gospel and we have personal responsibility and privilege so to do so, so to do, we're not puppets. The truth of God's mercy drove him on to mission and to obedience and outstanding love to live for God who is worthy. He himself says he's the hardest working of the apostles.

All these guys, all these super apostles, I've worked harder than all of them. This is someone who knows God's sovereignty and he worked for God's glory because God had transformed him from the heart out and the Holy Spirit enabled him to do great things and so we are we're under no condemnation. We are God's children and we are called to live like that, to live with passion for our brothers and sisters who are lost for Eden but a for Scotland, for whatever we are to reach out and to share and to tell them about this great God who died on the cross so that anyone who comes to him he will not cast out. He will save, he will redeem and that is the great personal input that we've seen in this chapter that Paul knows this great security of a good just God who chooses but that we have a passionate responsibility to serve him, to love him, to believe in him and to know that as we stand before him one day the only way to stand before him is covered in the righteousness of Jesus.

Amen. Lord God we ask and pray that you would help us to understand this really deep truth and truth that takes us into places that we can't go in many ways but we do know that nobody making up a religion would ever make up that chapter and we know that ultimately it's marvelous comfort that God cannot be cheated, cannot be surprised, cannot be second guessed, cannot be in any way fully understood because he is God and there is no other and yet to think of this God nailed to a tree in Jerusalem seems quite remarkable. We thank you that you lived among us for 30 years that you walked in the streets and your poverty stricken and you had parents and you lost your parents, you lost your father and some of your brothers believed and some didn't and most people rejected you and you were threatened and abused and rejected and yet in all of that sovereign power you committed to the cross and you committed to saving a people who had no regard for you and no interest in you and because before the creation of the world you've in your mercy you have brought us this great hope.

So may we live in it with all its mystery and may it transform our lives for Jesus' sake.
Amen.