

Children of the Promise



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Romans 9.*

Memory Text: “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth” (*Romans 9:18*).

As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. . . . For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy . . . , and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (*Rom. 9:13, 15*).

What is Paul talking about here? What about human free will and the freedom to choose, without which very little of what we believe makes sense? Are we not free to choose or reject God? Or are these verses teaching that certain people are elected to be saved and others to be lost, regardless of their own personal choices?

The answer is found, as usual, by looking at the bigger picture of what Paul is saying. Paul is following a line of argument in which he attempts to show God's right to pick those whom He will use as His “elected” ones. After all, God is the One who carries the ultimate responsibility of evangelizing the world. Therefore, why can He not choose as His agents whomever He wills? So long as God cuts off no one from the opportunity of salvation, such an action on God's part is not contrary to the principles of free will. Even more important, it's not contrary to the great truth that Christ died for all humans and His desire that everyone have salvation.

As long as we remember that Romans 9 is not dealing with the personal salvation of those it names; but that it is dealing with their call to do a certain work, the chapter presents no difficulties.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 9.

Paul's Burden

“And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel” (*Exod. 19:6*).

God needed a missionary people to evangelize a world steeped in paganism, darkness, and idolatry. He chose the Israelites and revealed Himself to them. He planned that they would become a model nation and thus attract others to the true God. “It was God’s purpose that by the revelation of His character through Israel” the world “should be drawn unto Him,” Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 290. “Through the teaching of the sacrificial service, Christ was to be uplifted before the nations, and all who would look unto Him should live. . . . As the numbers of Israel increased they were to enlarge their borders, until their kingdom should embrace the world.”

Read Romans 9:1–12. What point is Paul making here about the faithfulness of God amid human failures?

Paul is building a line of argument in which he will show that the promise made to Israel had not completely failed. There exists a remnant through whom God still aims to work. To establish the validity of the idea of the remnant, Paul dips back into Israelite history. He shows that God has always been selective: (1) God did not choose all the seed of Abraham to be His covenant, only the line of Isaac; (2) He did not choose all the descendants of Isaac, only those of Jacob.

It’s important, too, to see that heritage, or ancestry, does not guarantee salvation. You can be of the right blood, the right family, even of the right church, and yet still be lost, still be outside the promise. It is faith, a faith that works by love, that reveals those who are “children of the promise” (*Rom. 9:8*).

Look at the phrase in Romans 9:6: “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” What important message can we find there for ourselves, as Adventists, who in many ways play the same roles in our era that the ancient Israelites did in theirs?

Elected

“It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (Rom. 9:12, 13).

As stated in the introduction for this week, it is impossible to understand Romans 9 properly until one recognizes that Paul is not speaking of individual salvation. He is here speaking of particular roles that God was calling upon certain individuals to play. God wanted Jacob to be the progenitor of the people who would be His special evangelizing agency in the world. There is no implication in this passage that Esau could not be saved. God wanted him to be saved as much as He desires all people to be saved.

Read Romans 9:14, 15. How do we understand these words in the context of what we have been reading?

Again Paul is not speaking of individual salvation, because in that area God extends mercy to all, for He “will have all men to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4). “The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men” (Titus 2:11). But God can choose nations to play roles, and, although they can refuse to play those roles, they cannot prevent God’s choice. No matter how hard Esau may have willed it, he could not have become the progenitor of the Messiah nor of the chosen people.

In the end, it was no arbitrary choice on the part of God, not some divine decree, by which Esau was shut out from salvation. The gifts of His grace through Christ are free to all. We’ve all been elected to be saved, not lost (Eph. 1:4, 5; 2 Pet. 1:10). It’s our own choices, not God’s, that keep us from the promise of eternal life in Christ. Jesus died for every human being. Yet, God has set forth in His Word the conditions upon which every soul will be elected to eternal life—faith in Christ, which leads the justified sinner to obedience.

As if no one else even existed, you yourself were chosen in Christ even before the foundation of the world, to have salvation. This is your calling, your election, all given to you by God through Jesus. What a privilege, what a hope! All things considered, why does everything else pale in comparison to this great promise? Why would it be the greatest of all tragedies to let sin, self, and the flesh take away from you all that’s been promised you in Jesus?

Mysteries

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (*Isa. 55:8, 9*).

Read Romans 9:17–24. Given what we have read so far, how are we to understand Paul’s point here?

By dealing with Egypt at the time of the Exodus in the manner He did, God was working for the salvation of the human race. God’s revelation of Himself in the plagues of Egypt and in the deliverance of His people was designed to reveal to the Egyptians, as well as to other nations, that the God of Israel indeed was the true God. It was designed to be an invitation for the peoples of the nations to abandon their gods and to come and worship Him.

Obviously Pharaoh had already made his choice against God, so that in hardening his heart, God was not cutting him off from the opportunity of salvation. The hardening was against the appeal to let Israel go, not against God’s appeal for Pharaoh to accept personal salvation. Christ died for Pharaoh just as much as for Moses, Aaron, and the rest of the children of Israel.

The crucial point in all this is that as fallen human beings we have such a narrow view of the world, of reality, and of God and how He works in the world. How can we expect to understand all of God’s ways when the natural world, everywhere we turn, holds mysteries we can’t understand? After all, it was only in the past 171 years that doctors learned it might be a good idea to wash their hands before performing surgery! That’s how steeped in ignorance we have been. And who knows, if time should last, what other things will we discover in the future that will reveal just how steeped in ignorance we are today?

Certainly we don’t always understand God’s ways, but Jesus came to reveal to us what God is like (*John 14:9*). Why, then, amid all of life’s mysteries and unexpected events is it so crucial for us to dwell on the character of Christ and what He has revealed to us about God and His love for us? How can knowing what God’s character is like help us to stay faithful amid trials that seem so unjustified and so unfair?

Ammi: “My People”

In Romans 9:25 Paul quotes Hosea 2:23, and in Romans 9:26 he quotes Hosea 1:10. The background is that God instructed Hosea to take “a wife of whoredoms” (*Hos. 1:2*) as an illustration of God’s relationship with Israel, because the nation had gone after strange gods. The children born to this marriage were given names signifying God’s rejection and punishment of idolatrous Israel. The third child was named *Loammi* (*Hos. 1:9*), meaning literally “not my people.”

Yet, amid all this, Hosea predicted that the day would come when, after punishing His people, God would restore their fortunes, take away their false gods, and make a covenant with them. (*See Hos. 2:11–19.*) At this point those who were *Loammi*, “not my people,” would become *Ammi*, “my people.”

In Paul’s day, the *Ammi* were “even us, . . . not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles” (*Rom. 9:24*). What a clear and powerful presentation of the gospel, a gospel that from the start was intended for the whole world. No wonder we as Seventh-day Adventists take part of our calling from Revelation 14:6, “Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (*NKJV*). Today, as in Paul’s day, and as in the days of ancient Israel, the good news of salvation is to be spread throughout the world.

Read Romans 9:25–29. Notice how much Paul quotes the Old Testament to make his point about the things that were happening in his day. What is the basic message found in this passage? What hope is being offered there to his readers?

The fact that some of Paul’s kinsmen rejected the appeal of the gospel gave him “great heaviness and continual sorrow” in his heart (*Rom. 9:2*). But at least there was a remnant. God’s promises do not fail, even when humans do. The hope we can have is that, in the end, God’s promises will be fulfilled, and if we claim those promises for ourselves, they will be fulfilled in us, as well.

How often have people failed you? How often have you failed yourself and others? Probably more times than you can count, right? What lessons can you learn from these failures about where your ultimate trust must lie?

Stumbling

“What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith” (Rom. 9:30–32). What’s the message here, and, more important, how can we take this message that was written in a certain time and place and apply the principles to ourselves today? How can we avoid making the same mistakes in our context that some Israelites did in theirs?

In words that cannot be misunderstood, Paul explains to his kinsmen why they are missing out on something that God wishes them to have—and more than that, on something they were actually pursuing but not achieving.

Interestingly, the Gentiles whom God had accepted had not even been striving for such acceptance. They had been pursuing their own interests and goals when the gospel message came to them. Grasping its value, they accepted it. God declared them righteous because they accepted Jesus Christ as their Substitute. It was a transaction of faith.

The problem with the Israelites was that they stumbled at the stumbling stone (*see Rom. 9:33*). Some, not all (*see Acts 2:41*), refused to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah whom God had sent. He did not meet their expectations of the Messiah; hence, they turned their backs on Him when He came.

Before this chapter ends, Paul quotes another Old Testament text: “As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (*Rom. 9:33*). In this passage, Paul shows again just how crucial true faith is in the plan of salvation (*see also 1 Pet. 2:6–8*). A rock of offense? And yet, whoever believes in Him shall not be ashamed? Yes, for many, Jesus is a stumbling block, but for those who know Him and love Him, He is another kind of rock, “the rock of my salvation” (*Ps. 89:26*).

Have you ever found Jesus to be a “stumbling block” or a “rock of offense”? If so, how? That is, what were you doing that brought you into that situation? How did you get out, and what did you learn so that, one hopes, you never find yourself in that type of contrary relationship to Jesus again?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Later English Reformers,” pp. 261, 262, in *The Great Controversy*; “Faith and Works,” pp. 530, 531, in *The SDA Encyclopedia*; Ellen G. White Comments, pp. 1099, 1100, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1.

“There is an election of individuals and a people, the only election found in the word of God, where man is elected to be saved. Many have looked at the end, thinking they were surely elected to have heavenly bliss; but this is not the election the Bible reveals. Man is elected to work out his own salvation with fear and trembling. He is elected to put on the armor, to fight the good fight of faith. He is elected to use the means God has placed within his reach to war against every unholy lust, while Satan is playing the game of life for his soul. He is elected to watch unto prayer, to search the Scriptures, and to avoid entering into temptation. He is elected to have faith continually. He is elected to be obedient to every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God, that he may be, not a hearer only, but a doer of the word. This is Bible election.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, pp. 453, 454.

“No finite mind can fully comprehend the character or the works of the Infinite One. We cannot by searching find out God. To minds the strongest and most highly cultured, as well as to the weakest and most ignorant, that holy Being must remain clothed in mystery. But though ‘clouds and darkness are round about Him: righteousness and judgment are the foundation of His throne.’ Psalm 97:2, R.V. We can so far comprehend His dealing with us as to discern boundless mercy united to infinite power. We can understand as much of His purposes as we are capable of comprehending; beyond this we may still trust the hand that is omnipotent, the heart that is full of love.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 169.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Certain Christians teach that, even before we were born, God chose some to be saved and some to be lost. If you happen to have been one of those whom God, in His infinite love and wisdom, preordained to be lost, then no matter the choices you make, you are doomed to perdition—which many people believe means burning in hell for eternity. In other words, through no choice of our own, but only through God’s providence, some are predestined to live without a saving relationship with Jesus here in this life, only to spend the next one burning forever in the fires of hell. What’s wrong with that picture? How does that view contrast with our understanding of these same issues?
- 2 How do you see the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its calling in the world today paralleling the role of ancient Israel in its day? What are the similarities and the differences? In what ways are we doing better? Or are we doing worse? Justify your answer.

From Cigarettes to Castles: Part 2

One day at church an invitation for baptism was given. Whoever wished to be baptized was given materials, including a review of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's fundamental beliefs.

This whole spiritual experience happened very rapidly for me—in less than two months. With cigarette in hand, I began filling out the baptismal request form. As I continued reading, I read about abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. I didn't know how I was going to quit.

In February 1997, I was baptized. While I stopped drinking right away, I still struggled with tobacco. I tried everything to quit smoking, but nothing worked. Finally, I prayed, "Lord, please take it away from me." And He did.

My aunt, who lives in another village, invited me to help her around the house for a week. There was only one store that sold cigarettes, and it wasn't close. When I arrived, I told my aunt that I was now a Christian and was no longer the person I was used to be. But she didn't know I still struggled with smoking. Every day she gave me work to do. Four days passed without cigarettes. The fifth day, I came back home and still hadn't smoked a cigarette. Now I see that being at my aunt's was like a rehab center for me. I'm amazed at God's wisdom and how He found a way for me to quit smoking.

When I was planning to be baptized, my sisters told me that I should ask my parents for forgiveness. Both of my parents were crying with happiness. That's when I realized that you can have all sorts of victories with God.

One thing that amazed me was that as we started to build a church, people brought offerings to the church such as gold and jewelry, and, knowing my past, they commissioned me to sell it. I was amazed and touched with that kind of trust.

Later I became a literature evangelist (LE) and youth leader. It was during a gathering of LEs that I met my future wife, Bogdona!

We now have three lovely daughters, and I'm an elder in our church. I'm just amazed at how God was able to turn me around and give me this life that I never even had dreamed of. In a way, my dad was right—the end did come in 1999; the end of my former life.

There is one thing I regret—the years of my youth that were spent in vain. They were completely empty years—no purpose, no meaning, no satisfaction, and no direction. I understand now that it's better to live with God. You can have all kinds of victories in your life when you're with God, when you pray sincerely to Him.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Romans 9*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Grasp the reality that God has not forsaken Israel and that He wants to save all—both Jews and Gentiles.

Feel: Develop a convincing sense that while God desires to save all, He alone chooses who carries out particular missions in His kingdom.

Do: Seek to clarify the difference between whom God saves and whom He appoints as His saving agents.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: How God Redeems the Lost

A Why was it that Israel so obviously had misunderstood its divine destiny?

B Why has God never made an unconditional covenant to save any people or religious group?

II. Feel: Sense God’s Patience With the Failures of Israel.

A The Jewish rejection and crucifixion of Christ could have brought rejection by God, so why has God not fully rejected Israel?

B Have you ever really blown an important job opportunity yet gotten a second chance? Please share your reaction to this special blessing.

III. Do: Yield to God’s Will.

A Why might someone be jealous of another’s ministry?

B How does the fact that God determines who receives what when it comes to “spiritual gifts” speak to God’s service appointments?

▶ **Summary:** It is important to seek to understand God’s will to save both Jew and Gentile and to clarify how He chooses whomever He will to reach the lost.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Romans 9*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: It is critically important to understand that God does not predetermine anyone’s eternal salvation. But He does determine who will do His bidding when it comes to mission assignments and spiritual gifting. In such a life of Christian witness and service, there is a great blessing in being a part of God’s redemptive purposes.

Just for Teachers: God does not predetermine anyone’s personal salvation. But He has been quite sovereign when it comes to Israel’s destiny as God’s chosen mission witnesses to the lost human race. So, this week’s key question is: How does God relate to the failures of His Old Testament people in the context of His desire for the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles?

Opening Discussion: Recall the first time that you ever read Romans 9. What questions immediately came to your mind regarding God’s seemingly irresistible predestination, especially as it related to questions addressing personal salvation from sin and eternal death?

Questions for Discussion:

- ❶ What is it in God’s nature that assures us that He is not a Being who irresistibly predetermines everyone’s eternal destiny?
- ❷ Why does Paul seem so burdened regarding the salvation of the Jews?
- ❸ Consider Paul’s obvious preoccupation with what has been called “the Jewish question” in Romans 9. What contributed to Paul’s anxious puzzlement over the fact that the Jews were resisting the gospel, while a great number of Gentiles gladly flocked into the churches and freely embraced it?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: While we seek to justify God’s desire to save all sinful humans, the key question that Romans 9 addresses is: How does God intend ultimately to redeem the Israelite (Jewish) people, in spite of their past failures? In other words, as part of our search, we need to follow carefully Paul’s argument that seeks to justify God’s redemptive providences in saving all, both Jew and Gentile.

Bible Commentary

I. Paul's Burden and Purpose for Both Jews and Gentiles *(Review Romans 9:1–13 with your class.)*

In these verses, Paul seeks to demonstrate that God's plan to use Israel has not totally failed, as it is still producing a "remnant" of the seed of Abraham. So, while God has been selective, His will to save the lost is slowly but surely being effected. For instance, Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, was chosen, and he (by faith in God's promises and power) begot a son named Isaac; then Isaac by faith begot Jacob, the direct progenitor of the tribes of Israel. Therefore, though God has been suffering setbacks, He is steadily, persistently, and providentially raising up a faithful "seed," or redeemed children. And these miracle children are becoming His progenitors of Israel and agents of salvation in a world racked by sin and hopelessness.

Consider This: Even though God has been selective in choosing His special servants, what evidence do we have that God has, or has not, been arbitrary in whom He saves?

II. God's Elected Messengers to the World *(Review Romans 9:14–24 with your class.)*

Paul now continues his argument by citing Exodus 33:19 and 9:16 in order to make the point that God will have "mercy on whomever" He chooses. And He will show His "compassion" and His "power . . . in all the earth" (*Rom. 9:15, 17, NKJV*). Paul also sets forth God's sovereign "power" in the illustration of the divine Potter, whose prerogative it is to shape the clay as He chooses (*Rom. 9:19–24*). So, clearly God is the One who is in charge when it comes to deciding who will do His missionary will on the earth.

Discussion Question: God is in charge of choosing His missionary agencies. Does this fact negate His ability to impart to humans the right to choose to accept or reject their eternal salvation? Why, or why not?

III. God Is in Charge of His Mission to Save the World. *(Review Romans 9:25–33 with your class.)*

Spend a few moments going over the Old Testament passages cited by Paul that prophesy about God's mission to the Gentiles (*such as Hos. 2:23; 1:10; Isa. 10:22, 23; 1:9, and 13:19*).

Consider This: What evidence is given in these verses that points to God's passion to save both Jews and Gentiles?

IV. A Universal Offer of Salvation (Review 1 Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; John 3:16; Titus 2:11; and 2 Peter 3:9 with your class.)

The texts for review clearly witness to a universal offer of salvation. But how do they, in turn, relate to Paul's thesis of God's sovereign choice of Israel to do His missionary bidding?

In answer to this question, let's ponder these five texts, which seem to clearly speak of a free-grace, freewill version of salvation:

1. "God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:3, 4, NKJV); compared with
2. "God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10, NKJV);
3. "'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life'" (John 3:16, NKJV);
4. "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men" (Titus 2:11, NKJV); and
5. "The Lord . . . is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9, NKJV).

Consider This: Recall the question that commenced this section: What are we to make of these verses? By way of answering, ponder the following rationale: If Paul means in Romans 9 that God has irresistibly predetermined the salvation of all men, regardless of their freely given, grace- and faith-based response to the gospel, then we have caught the Scriptures in a gross contradiction. What is to be made of this supposed conundrum? It then would seem "logical" to conclude that the great controversy theme is effectually shorn of its interpretive power to explain the origin of sin and suffering. The terrible result of this conclusion would be that God is left as the sole cause of evil and the Bestower of an arbitrary salvation from the wages of sin. How does a correct understanding of Bible truth in Romans 9 overturn this false assumption?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Invite your class to ponder the last question posed regarding the dynamics of the great controversy theme in the previous step, and then tackle the following questions:

Application Questions:

- ① There is a theme that is often referred to in philosophy and theology as "theodicy." Namely, it is the question of how we can go about vindicating or properly "judging" God in the face of the problem of seemingly unmitigated human suffering and sorrow. How have you struggled to make sense of the problem of evil?

- ② How does our explanation of Romans 9 make contextual sense in the unfolding argument of Paul in Romans? Or have we improperly imported a “freewill, free-grace” theme that is alien to Paul’s overall thought? Discuss.
- ③ Is it fair to Paul to place him in the larger narrative of the biblical canon when it comes to the numerous freewill, free-grace passages cited above?
- ④ How does the great controversy provide a satisfactory explanation of the problem of evil and the inconceivable amount of human suffering and loss manifested in the history of this world?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: As your class wrestles with Romans 9 and Paul’s struggle with the Judaizers, seek to lead them into a sympathetic identity with Paul and his missionary burdens for both Jews and Gentiles.

Activities:

- ① Ask the class to reread reflectively Paul’s anguished, even “hand-wringing,” confession of concern for the salvation of the Jews in Romans 9:1–4. Then ponder the second activity listed.
 - ② After reflecting on your experience of Christian witness and service, ask yourselves (first individually, then as a class) if you have ever reached the point where you were willing to die either “with” (as Moses) or “for” (as Paul) the Christians and the non-Christians in your life.
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- ③ As Paul ponders the differing ways that “Israel” (particularly first-century “Jews”) and the “Gentiles” have related to the gospel in Romans 9:30–33, he then compares the two contrasting experiences of those who pursue “the law of righteousness” (*Rom. 9:31*). He identifies these two experiences as (a) “the righteousness of faith” (*Rom. 9:30, NKJV*) and (b) “works of the law” (*Rom. 9:32*). What would be some key characteristics that could help the followers of Christ to discern the distinctions between experiences that have been based on “faith” as opposed to those based on “works of the law”?
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