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My People

Romans 9:25-29

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Romans 9 began with Paul's lament for his fellow Jews who had rejected the Messiah. Jesus came to save them from coming judgement—even dying for their sake the death that they deserved. Many, like Paul, recognised in Jesus the promised Messiah—God's King—and submitted in faith to his saving lordship. But the vast majority rejected him and were happily marching straight into the coming judgement.

Now, Paul's main theme throughout this letter to the Romans has been that the good news about Jesus, particularly his death, resurrection, and his lordship, reveals God's righteousness. In other words, when we see God himself in Jesus, the king giving his life for the sake of his people, even as they reject his claim of lordship and call for his crucifixion, and when we see God raise Jesus from the dead, overturning the false verdict of the people and truly declaring him to be Saviour and Lord—when we see that—we can have *no doubts* that God is one-hundred per-cent faithful to fulfil his promises and to do what he says he will do. Paul spent the first eight chapters of Romans explain this in detail.

But now he anticipates an objection. It's certainly one he would have heard as he travelled and preached in synagogues and confronted unbelieving fellow Jews. People would look at God's promises to Israel and then turn to Paul and say, "If God always does what he promises and if Jesus truly is the Messiah, as you claim, what's your explanation for Israel's failure to follow him? Maybe he wasn't really the Messiah. If he is, then God must not be true to his word. And to this Paul gave an emphatic "No!" God is righteous. His word does *not* fail and it never will. Jesus is, in fact, the proof of it.

To make his point, Paul walks us through the story of Israel. In fact, Paul even begins walking us through it before he even really gets started. When he introduces the problem of Israel's unfaithfulness, he expresses his own sorrow and anguish for his people by quoting from Exodus. He wrote, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." This was Moses' plea before the Lord. He came down from Mount Sinai carrying God's law. Here was the Lord just as he was preparing to enter into covenant with these people he had just rescued from slavery, and Moses finds them worshipping a golden calf—prostituting themselves to a pagan idol. The Lord sent his judgement in the form of a plague, but Moses pleaded with him: This people has sinned a great sin...but if you would only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out instead". Even before getting into the argument, Paul reminds us from the outset that God was true to his word as he led his people through the wilderness and into the promised land, even though—because of their sin and idolatry—many of fell to God's judgement along the way.

You see, Paul explains, not everyone who calls himself an Israelite is really part of Israel. You can be a biological descendant of Abraham, but Abraham's *real* family—Paul calls them his "seed" or "offspring"—the people through whom God fulfils his agenda to bring the human race back to himself and to renew his creation—these are Abraham's seed *by faith*.

So, he asks in verses 6-13, does the fact that most of Israel has rejected Jesus as Messiah mean that God is unrighteous, that his word has failed? No. And Paul took us back to two stories that everyone knew. The first is the story of Abraham's sons, Ishmael and Isaac. God rejected Ishmael and chose to work through Isaac. There's more to the story than that, but Paul's point is that not everyone descended from Abraham is part of the true Israel or the true seed of Abraham. The fact that Ishmael has been lost to history in no way proves God's unfaithfulness. God has fulfilled

his promises through Isaac. Paul also draws out of the story that this is how God works to save. Right at the beginning of Israel's story, he winnowed out half of Abraham's sons. And, let's not forget, that in choosing Abraham, he winnowed out the rest of the entire human race. This is how God works. There's actually a reason for it. And it also means that once this winnowing has accomplished its purpose, allowing humanity's sin to be concentrated in one person, the winnowing will be reversed as the saving proclamation goes out—as Jesus says in the book of Acts—first to Jerusalem, then to Judea, Samaria, and to all the earth, bringing back successively the people who had been excluded from Abraham's seed.

Now, someone would say to Paul, but God had promised Isaac. He didn't promise Ishmael. Ishmael was the result of Abraham and Sarah trying to bring about God's promise on their own through her handmaid. And in response, Paul points to Isaac's sons. They were twins. Same father. Same mother. You don't get any more equal than that. And yet, Paul writes, before they were even born, before either had had a chance to prove himself worthy of God's promises, God had spoken: The older shall serve the younger. Paul quotes the prophet Malachi: "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." Like Ishmael, Esau was lost to history. The nation descended from him was later judged by the Lord. Edom is no more. But does that mean that God has not fulfilled the promise he made to Abraham? Of course not. Paul's point is that this is how God works. This is how God has always worked. And, in fact, in the case of Jacob and Esau, the Lord had *promised* that this is how he would work through them even before they were born. Not everyone born of Abraham and his family is truly Abraham's seed—not in the way that counts, at any rate.

Remember Jacob. Think about his character. Jacob was hardly an admirable guy. He was smarmy and dishonest. He cheated his brother and lied to his father. He was always trying to figure out how to manipulate other people to get what he wanted—even

God. And that anticipates a second objection. Someone's bound to read Israel's story and see God choosing this person and not that person and ask, "Well, is God unjust? Is God being arbitrary?" And, again, Paul says emphatically, "By no means!" Paul knew that a Jew who knew the story of his own people could never think that God is arbitrary or unjust. He jumps from Jacob to the Exodus. Israel was sinful and rebellious, but God promised that he would preserve a remnant and bring them to the promised land. In the context of the Israel's rebelliousness, the Lord declared to Moses: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion". Paul immediately follows this with God's words to Pharaoh: "I have raised you up to show you my power and so that my name will be proclaimed in all the earth." Pharaoh refused to obey God's command to free the Israelites. God could have squashed him like a bug. God could have squashed all of Egypt, for that matter. But God, instead, hardened Pharaoh's heart and allowed him to continue in his obstinate opposition so that when God finally did act, his power and his glory would be on full display. The world would see the God of Israel triumphant over Pharaoh and the false gods of Egypt and God's name would be glorified.

Paul's first point is this: There's nothing arbitrary in God's choosing. His plan is to make himself known in all the earth. That's what he promised Abraham he was going to do through Israel and that's precisely what he's done. Again, God's word has not failed. God has done exactly what he said he would do despite the opposition of kings and nations.

Second, Paul sums up this part of the argument writing, "He has mercy on whomever he will, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills". People squirm when they hear this, the same they squirm when they hear a passage like the one from Malachi about God loving Jacob and hating Esau. Brothers and Sisters, here's our problem: When we accuse God of injustice, we've

forgotten that we are sinners. As Paul wrote back in Chapter 3, "No one is righteous, no not one". That's the critical thing for us to remember. In drawing on the account of the Exodus and particularly of Israel's idolatry in the golden calf incident and also in highlighting smarmy, dishonest Jacob's story, Paul's reminding us that in all of these cases, God is not dealing with innocent people. Just the opposite: he's dealing with sinners. The point we need to remember is this: *Nobody deserves to be saved. Nobody.* If God chooses to harden the hearts of some—which in Pharaoh's case in the Exodus story, means allowing him to continue in his disobedience and rebellion, thus confirming his opposition to God—if God chooses to allow that to happen, he is not being unjust. He's actually giving sinners what they deserve. Again, as Paul wrote earlier: "The wages of sin is death". If you sin and get death, that is justice. If God chooses in other cases to have compassion on sinners—as he did with the Jacob, as he did with the Israelites he delivered from slavery and brought to the promised land, as he did with the remnant that returned from the Babylonian Exile, he is not being unjust either. No, in those cases he is showing mercy. You see, we forget that we are sinners and when we do that we get indignant when we see God's justice at work. But when we remember that no one is righteous, no not one, we realise that the real mystery is not that some are saved and some are not, *but that anyone is saved at all.* We all deserve God's judgement. If God gives us what we deserve, that's justice. If God shows us compassion, which we don't deserve, that's mercy. But in neither case is God dishing out injustice. If a person is lost, the blame is not God's but his or her own. If a person is saved, however, the credit and the glory can go only to God. And that's Paul point and it's the point God made to Pharaoh all those years ago: His agenda is to make himself known in all the earth. Both his justice and his mercy proclaim his glory.

There's a mystery here that Paul doesn't fully answer, because it's beyond the understanding of any of us. That doesn't stop us from asking. And Paul's

answer isn't meant to discourage legitimate questions. He aims his answer at the people who continue to stand, like Pharaoh or like rebellious Israel, indignantly before God demanding answers and insisting that he is unjust. As he was writing this, Paul no doubt had in mind more than one occasion when he made this argument to his fellow Jews and they strenuously objected. This is the point at which, as we saw last week, he quotes from Jeremiah and brings to mind the prophet's visit to a potter. Jeremiah watched as the potter worked the clay and as the pot he was forming went wrong. The potter squashed the clay back into a lump and started over. The pot *would* be made. But Paul casts his Jewish opponent as the indignant clay pot arguing with the potter, "Why have you made me like this?" And, of course, in doing this, Paul is putting his fellow Jews who rejected Jesus in the role of rebellious and idolatrous Israel as she stood rebuked by Jeremiah.

Isaiah also writes about God and Israel as potter and clay. He warned that a people who honour God with their lips, but whose hearts are far from him should not delude themselves into thinking that God does not know their deeds and thoughts. The clay cannot say to the potter, "He did not make me...He has no understanding" (Isaiah 29:13-16). Jeremiah watched as the potter squashed his ruined pot and started over, "as it seemed good to the potter to do". And the Lord spoke to him, "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? Declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel" (Jeremiah 18:1-6). God's point, speaking through Jeremiah, is that if he "shapes disaster" for unrighteous Israel (18:11), Israel had no right or grounds to complain about it.

This is the story of Israel thus far and it brings Paul up to the current situation with his unbelieving fellow Jews. Israel deserves judgement. God, if he is truly a just God, must judge Israel or his name will be slandered by the nations. But he is also patient. He has endured with much patience clay pots prepared

for destruction. It's important, also, to remember that this isn't some kind of abstract or final judgement that hasn't happened yet. We too often read the Gospels and read Paul (and the Old Testament prophets, for that matter) out of their historical contexts and mis-apply what's being said there—often thinking it's aimed directly at us or that passages about coming judgement are about something in our future. In most cases, these passages about coming judgement are referring to events that have already happened—like the Exile or like the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. What Paul is writing about here is the judgement that Jesus had in view throughout his ministry when he called people to repentance. Judgement was coming on Jerusalem and the Jewish people—on this wicked or crooked generation. But at the same time, God has in his patience, made known “the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy”. These churches made up of Jews and Gentiles were a very real demonstration to the world that the God who judges—whether his own people or the pagan nations—also creates something new in the process. This is what Paul was getting at back in 3:25-26. In the present time—that's Paul's time—when God has passed over or delayed judgement on Israel's disobedience, he has proved himself to be righteous by putting forward Jesus as an atonement for sin, so that those who are justified by faith may live when God's day of wrathful judgement comes.

That brings us to verses 25-29. Paul now gets to the point of God's winnowing of Israel and he does it by quoting Hosea and Isaiah. First, Hosea. Look at verses 25-26:

**“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’
and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”
“And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’
there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”**

Roughly eight-hundred years before Jesus, God called Hosea to speak to the

northern kingdom of Israel. Right from the beginning of their break with Judah, the northern tribes had walked into disobedience and idolatry. Not one of their kings did good. Through Hosea the Lord declared his coming judgement. He did this by instructing Hosea to marry a prostitute named Gomer. Time after time, Gomer abandoned Hosea to return to her life of prostitution. Each time, Hosea lovingly sought her out and brought her back to his home. Hosea's marriage and his love for Gomer made up a prophetic act that illustrated the Lord's relationship with his people: seeking her out in love while she repeatedly prostituted herself to other gods. Gomer bore Hosea a son and daughter, who became living object lessons of Israel's relationship with the Lord. The daughter was named “Not Pitied” and his son, “Not my people”. Judgement was coming. And yet, God gave a message of hope to come on the other side of judgement. A remnant would survive. The people called “Not pitied” would become the beloved and the people called “Not my people” would, once again, be called “My people”. Knowing that God works in the present the same way he worked in the past, Paul applies this to the Church he had come to know—a church in which Gentiles—“Not my people”—have joined with Jews.

The second set of quotes, in verses 27-29, is from Isaiah:

And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.” And as Isaiah predicted, “If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring [or “seed”], we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.”

Isaiah looked forward to the armies of Babylon sweeping down and bringing God's justice, this time not on Israel, but on Judah—all that was left of the twelve tribes. Though they be numbered like the sands of the sea—remember that

was God's promise to Abraham—only a remnant would return from exile. Nevertheless, God would fulfil his purposes and his promises through that remnant. If not for the remnant, Israel would be like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, wiped out for their unrighteousness. This is the point of the question the disciples put to Jesus when they asked, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” They heard Jesus talk of the judgement that was coming soon on Israel and they understood it in terms of this narrative of judgement and remnant that was so integral to Israel's story. When Jesus responded by telling them to struggle to enter through the narrow door—similar to what he said about the broad and easy way that leads to destruction and the narrow and difficult way that leads to life—he wasn't talking about some far off judgement day. He was talking about the judgement that was coming on Israel in a generation. Paul saw a second and similar judgement coming on the world of the Greeks and Romans. Judgement was coming, but God would save a remnant through whom he would carry out his purposes.

Paul isn't quite there yet, but this will lead him straight to the Messiah. As God winnowed down Israel, he did so with Jesus in mind. Paul tells us the story in order to show that all along, God was electing and directing—calling Israel out of the nations in the first place, so that in time she could be the place where sin would be concentrated into one place so that it could be dealt with once and for all in a single act. Through Israel all the evil in the world is funnelled onto Jesus, the Messiah, Israel's representative. Bp. Wright puts this very vividly writing, “The story of Abraham's family through the exodus and exile to the Messiah himself is a story of the cross casting its shadow ahead of it.”¹ Everything in the story—and, extraordinarily, especially Israel's hard-hearted rebellion—turns out to be essential to God's plan that the Messiah would, himself, bear Israel's sin and through her, the sin of the whole world.

¹ *Romans* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), page 643.

And so out of the remnant—out of Jesus himself—the “seed”, the true children of Abraham will emerge. If not for God’s winnowing down the people—all the way down to Jesus himself—Abraham’s seed would have been wiped off the face of the earth like Sodom and Gomorrah. The glory of it is that the remnant—now including both Jews and Gentiles—far exceeds anything Abraham could have imagined.

This is the glory that emerges when we’re able to stand back and look at the larger story or at the big picture. We often chafe and balk at the idea of the sovereignty of God. We look at individual episodes in the story and cry out, “But that’s not fair!” Often it’s when things happen in our own lives that we shake our fist at God and angrily cry out that he has been unjust. Brothers and Sisters, it’s okay to weep over hard things. Paul wept for his own people as they rejected the Messiah and marched on to their own doom. But he never lost sight of the righteousness of God. And that’s because he understood that this story is bigger than any one person or even any one people or nation. He could look back to the beginning, where the story went wrong, and understood that it went wrong, not because of God, but because of us. It went wrong when we chose to doubt God’s goodness and wisdom—when we tried to become gods ourselves. He understood that every time we shake our fists at God, accusing him of injustice or questioning his goodness and wisdom, we are re-enacting that very first sin in the garden. The glory revealed in the story is that God has showered his enemies with mercy. He has continued to work with people who refuse to trust him. Brothers and Sisters, at those very points in the story where we’re most likely to question God’s goodness—those points where the Ishmaels and the Esau are excluded, those points, like the failure of Israel to believe that caused Paul his deepest sorrow—it is in those very points and at those precise times, that God is at work to bring redemption, first narrowing his own people down to a single point in Jesus, so that by his death and resurrection he could deal once and for all with Israel’s sin, and then—as

Paul will explain in the chapters to come—hardening the hearts of Israel so that the good news will go out to gather in the the nations.

Dear Friends, this is a story of glory. It’s a story that should move us to love and praise and obedience as we see the righteousness, as we see the faithfulness of God. It’s a story of mercy. As Paul wrote in verse 16, “It depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” It’s easy to be overwhelmed by the idea of God’s sovereignty. It’s easy to become terrified if we look at his sovereignty apart from this story of mercy—to think that while God is sovereign, that he acts unpredictable or arbitrarily. But Paul reminds us that we can take comfort in his sovereignty if we have the big picture in view. This is the sovereign God we know in Jesus. This is the sovereign God whose mercy overflowed at the cross. This is the sovereign God, who even in his judgement, is revealing his mercy to the world. We need only humble ourselves before him in faith, acknowledging his goodness and faithfulness, and we will begin to see his mercy, not just in the great story of redemption, but in our own lives as well.

Let us pray: Sovereign Father, we acknowledge today’s Collect that we do not put our trust in anything that we do. We are sinners. You are the righteous one. Teach us to trust in you. As we steep ourselves in your Word, show us your great story of redemption, that we might both see ourselves and see you with the proper perspective. Show us your mercy and your grace, show us your goodness and wisdom. Keep your Son, Jesus, and his cross always before our eyes that we might see ourselves, that we might see you, and that we might see history itself through him and through his sacrifice. Amen.