

Unveiling All His Glory: It's All About Him

Romans 9:15-19

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Every week we have guests who don't know the culture of our church. If that's you, you've happened in on *All About Him* Sunday. What is that? Many, many years ago I did a sermon on the supremacy of Christ in all things. The next year I did the same theme from a different text of Scripture. Then it became a thing. This is our 23rd annual *All About Him*. Why does it matter to us? Because it matters so much to God that the church of Jesus Christ be the church of Jesus Christ. The church is to have a clear affection and worship of Jesus. We call it *All about Him*. This has served us well keeping us doctrinally grounded and emphasizing the most important thing.

This year is slightly different in that our passage in Romans 9 is less a focus on Jesus in particular, but more on God and his glory as the reason God does what he does. It is one of the hardest passages in the Bible, but if there is a key that unlocks it, it is what *All About Him* has centered our church on for all these years: *Unveiling ALL His glory*.

I'm going to read it. Just cue up to your brain our last few weeks of messages in Romans 9. God has always had a particular grace. Abraham fathered Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was not the son of promise. Isaac was the son of promise. Isaac fathered Jacob and Esau. Esau was not the son of promise. Jacob was the son of promise. Why? To show that salvation "[doesn't depend] *on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy*" (Romans 9:16 ESV). He addresses in verse 14 the number one complaint, *that's not fair*. His answer? Sinners don't want fair because fair sends us all to hell. Salvation isn't God operating in the realm of fair, but in the realm of mercy. God is not unjust to condemn sinners and God is not unjust to show mercy to whom he wills. Fair is all humanity in hell. Mercy is some saved to heaven.

Paul now addresses the second common objection to election. Before I read this, if we were properly considering what it says we would read it with tears in our eyes. Tears for mercy but also tears for judgment. Do questions remain? Are there hard things and truths in tension that seem beyond us? Yes.

"You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory" (Romans 9:19-23).

If God is Sovereign, Why are We to Blame?

The fact that he addresses these questions indicates that what he is teaching is what we think he is teaching. If Paul wasn't saying election means God is sovereign over salvation, would you address questions like, *that's not fair* or *why are we to blame*? Would you double down like Paul does? No, you'd quickly say, *it's everyone's personal choice. That choice is*

free from any interference from God. God isn't sovereign over our choices, just everything else. If he would have said any of those things our interpretation would be much different. Instead, he does precisely what one would do IF one was teaching God is sovereign over salvation.

You get the question? If God chose Jacob and not Esau and Esau ended up in judgment forever, shouldn't Esau and Ishmael and Pharaoh have a right to accuse God, *if you are sovereign, why are we to blame? For who can resist His will?*

One thing we know it isn't saying is that if I want to become a Christian, if I repent of my sins and trust in Jesus, but was not chosen by God in eternity past, I cannot be saved. Why? Because this isn't the only verse in the Bible. We know the Bible says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

The apostles' sermons in Acts don't qualify their offer at all but urge everyone to believe in Jesus. Romans 9 isn't about people who want to be saved and can't because God didn't elect them. There is no such thing. It is about causality. It is about mercy. It is explaining how Esau's become Jacob's. A Pharaoh spiritually becomes a Moses. Without God's intervening grace, our hearts like Pharaoh are hard against God and the gospel. How do they become un-hard? How do they become receptive? How do we come to believe? God intervenes. God changes our hearts. We cannot do it without him.

While the breadth of Scripture gives that answer, that is not the direction Paul goes with his answer in Romans 9:19. ***Paul is swimming even deeper than how we are saved to why we are saved.*** While difficult, this passage is perhaps the clearest statement in the Bible as to why some are saved AND why some are not.

God is God, You are Not (Romans 9:19-22)

"You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" (Romans 9:19-20).

We want Paul to give a careful, logical answer to this question. He doesn't. Rather, he takes issue with our assumption that we have a right to ask it. *Who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Who are you, O creature, to suppose you have the right to rise up, place yourself over God, and call into question his goodness?*

In our legal system we have a similar principle. It's called *legal standing*. Anyone can file a case against someone, but it must be determined that they have standing. To have standing it must be proved the accuser has a right to make a particular accusation. This keeps frivolous cases from being brought by everybody against everybody. You often read of cases being thrown out of court because they lacked "standing."

This is where Paul goes; not with philosophical or theological answers, but whether sinful created beings have any standing or right to judge God in what he does. Is it presumptuous for sinners to accuse the Most High God with sin?

Our girls pepper us all day with questions. *Why? Why this? Why that? Why not this? Why not that?* Often, we answer it. But sometimes we say what parents have said for centuries, *Because*. That's parent code for, *I could explain this, but you aren't ready for it. You can't*

handle it yet. Mommy and Daddy have reasons for things that go beyond your preschool ability to comprehend. Because.

Listen to how this whole section in Romans ends,

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?'" (Romans 11:33–34)

Should we be surprised that the infinite mind of God does things in ways we can't reconcile? I can't completely reconcile that God is sovereign and humans are forever responsible for our moral and spiritual decisions. The Bible says both are true. That's mystery. I can't reconcile a holy, sovereign God purposing all things yet not being personally responsible for evil. I can't reconcile one thief next to Jesus going to paradise and the other going to hell. Ishmael. Isaac. Jacob. Esau. Moses. Pharaoh. And perhaps you under grace and someone sitting near you, not.

We want to know the inscrutable and understand the unsearchable. Paul says, *sinner don't have standing. Who are you, made-of-the-dust-of-the-earth human, to presume that you have standing to place God in the seat of the accused in the heavenly courtroom of righteousness and accuse him of wrongdoing?*

He illustrates this with the very familiar aspect of first-century life, a potter and his clay. These days pottery is far in the background. Stores like Pottery Barn don't actually sell pottery. There's no pottery in Pottery Barn. Just towels, home decor, and incredibly bored husbands. We don't understand pottery, but in the first-century pottery was everywhere all the time.

"Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" (Romans 9:20-21)

Paul imagines the impossible. A piece of clay accusing the Potter of wrongdoing. *Why have you made me like this cup, vase, cistern, whatever?* Clay doesn't talk, but clay doesn't have any right to presume it is in a higher place of wisdom for its purpose than the Potter.

Paul isn't saying we are nothing more than clay and all analogies break down. It is the irrational and irreverent place for clay to accuse the potter of wrongdoing. It's the Potter's right to make one vessel for honorable use—fine art pottery for example—and another for dishonorable use. It's the Potter's right and place, not the clay. He's the Potter, we are the clay. He's God. We are not.

That answer alone may be dissatisfying. Paul ventures now into the *why*. Why would God save some and not others? No matter where you are on the questions of sovereignty and choice, this is a very hard dilemma. Here is Paul's answer:

God is Unveiling ALL His Glory (Romans 9:22-23)

"What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory..." (Romans 9:22-23)

I heard a sermon recently which asks, "*what if the God your nice little evangelical church of your past told you about isn't the God of the Bible?*"¹ I think this is compelling and resonates with my own observation that much of evangelical Christianity reduces God to his love or his grace. In America, total pagans will sing *Amazing Grace* with bagpipes or stand for *God Bless America* in the 7th inning stretch. Everybody has a perspective on what God is like and assumes his desire is to bless everyone all the time. Is the real God of the Bible who you think he is?

Passages like this challenge our simplistic or politically correct definitions of God. How so? Here's the challenge. Does your understanding of God include his desire to be glorified in all that he is? *Yes, as long as he is glorifying attributes that work out well for me.* While God is love and mercy and grace and other popular divine attributes to sinners, he is much more than love, mercy, and grace. God is also holy, righteous, and just. We sinners don't prefer those attributes as much.

But we are clay. God is God. Paul poses a question which is really a statement of fact. God also desires to make known his power and wrath, not as information but as celebration. He "*has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction*" (Romans 9:22). *Vessel* keeps the pottery theme. *Vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.* Who is this describing? Back to Romans 1, "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth*" (Romans 1:18). These are sinners who by their refusal to submit to their Creator and/or trust in Christ receive God's wrath. *Vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.*

Prepared by whom? The Greek tense is passive. This could mean prepared by themselves or prepared by their own moral decisions for destruction. That's debated. *God endures them with patience.* What's that? A holy God would have every right to immediately sentence a sinner to eternal punishment. That sinners like Adam and Eve or Pharaoh or Judas or even Satan were not immediately in hell is because God has treated them with patience.

Why would God wait? Here is the answer our hearts long for in the question, *why did God allow evil and Satan and even the cross? "In order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory..."* (Romans 9:23) These two sections run parallel. To make known his wrath and power, God punishes sinners and to make known the riches of his grace and mercy, God saves sinners. We naturally are more excited about the glory of his mercy than the glory of his wrath.

But here is where God is fundamentally different from us. We want to celebrate our strengths and successes and hide our failures and deficiencies. So, the pictures posted on social media are ones in which we look good. We use the best angle hiding our least favorite parts of our bodies. Or we post pictures of our children as cute as could be and NOT in hissy fit mode. We celebrate ourselves at our best, not our worst.

With God, there is no worst. God feels no shame about any part of who he is nor should he.² All of him is perfect. All of God is beautiful and wonderful and worthy of praise and that includes his terrifying attributes as well—his holiness, power, and justice.

¹ John Piper, "How God Makes Known the Riches of His Glory to the Vessels of Mercy," www.desiringgod.org, February 16, 2003.

² See Donald Westblade, *Still Sovereign*, p. 86.

So why would God the potter make a pot named Pharaoh? A jar named Ishmael? A trash bin named Satan? To unveil the glory of all he is.

Further, how would vessels of mercy realize they are vessels of mercy if everyone was a vessel of mercy? Doesn't the reality of judgment make the reality of mercy even more wonderful? More praiseworthy?

What if the reason God didn't send Satan immediately to hell was that an infinite God purposed to use Satan's rebellion to unveil his glorious mercy? What if by waiting and allowing Satan to tempt Adam and Eve and orchestrate Jesus' cross, God's mercy and love are unveiled in ways that would never be known if there was no Satan? Or to quote Luther, "*The devil is God's devil.*"³

When we discipline our 6-year-old daughter, our four-year-old daughter is very quick to come to me and say, *Dada, I love you. Dada, I love you.* Why? Yes, she needs reassurance, etc. But at the root, is when she sees Daddy's judgment, it causes her to treasure Daddy's love.

Do you suppose one purpose for hell is that someday we will stare into that abyss of wrath and turn to God with tears and say, *Daddy, I love you?* Will not the terribleness of his wrath make the glory of his mercy even greater to us?

Today is our 7th wedding anniversary. Starting with my engagement ring, being married has meant more time in jewelry stores than the rest of my previous life. When you go to a jewelry store, they all do the same thing with their jewelry. They have lights mounted high on the ceiling shining down to make the jewelry sparkle. When you ask to see something, they always pull it out and place it on black velvet. They note beautiful aspects of the jewel. Let's say it's a diamond. *Note the color. Note the clarity. Note the size. Look at this. Look at that.* All of it against a dark background. Why?

You know why. The contrast to the black velvet shows the brilliance and beauty of the diamond even more. Is the diamond worth more with lights shining on it or without lights shining on it? Against the dark background or the white background? No. It's worth the same. What does the light do? What does the black velvet do? It shows by contrast the beauty of the diamond. Things are seen and value is perceived that would not be seen if there was no black velvet.

Why is there a hell? Why is there a Satan? Why is there a Pharaoh? Why is there a Judas? Why is there a crucified Son of God? One reason is that mercy never looks more wonderful than against the backdrop of non-mercy. How much does it mean to us that God sovereignly chose to unveil not just his wrath, but his mercy as well? And what have we done to deserve it? Nothing! Which means all the glory for our salvation is God's not ours. We deserved hell and wrath, but to unveil the mercy of God we find ourselves forever in his grace.

What do we say? *O the depths of the riches of the mercy of God.* This whole thing has no human glory in it at all. It is entirely purposed by a God who unveils all the glory of who he is by seeking and saving the lost. It's like a little girl who is lost, and Daddy finds her. What does she say? *Daddy, I found you!* That's how salvation feels to us. We found God. But if you go deeper into the mysteries of the infinite God, he found us. He saved us. He did it all. This is yet another way to say, *It's all about him.*

³ Martin Luther, Source unknown.

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