

Romans chapter 9 - “The Purpose of God According to Election”

Romans chapter 9 (which forms the New Testament portion of our readings for the day) introduces us to the way in which the purpose of God will be worked out. It will not be accomplished by the will or works of the flesh, but according to the promises made to the Fathers of old. Israel assumed that because they were literally descended from Abraham, this made them a blessed and a holy people. They also assumed that they could be constituted righteous by obedience to the Law of Moses (and the traditions they had attached to it), but both of these beliefs are directly challenged in Romans chapter 9:

“... they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (Rom. 9:8).

What counts is not literal descent, but a matter of promise. Those who believe in, and become part of the promises made of old are counted for seed, and therefore heirs of the inheritance. Again, Romans shows that the Divine purpose will not be brought about through fleshly desire or effort:

“So then, it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Rom. 9:16).

This aspect of *willing* is something we need to explore further. The Gospel of John informs us that those who become sons of God “were born, not of blood, *nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man*, but of God” (Jno.1:13). The “will” or desire of the flesh has no part in the outworking of the purpose of God. In fact, as we study the Word, progressing and developing in our faith, we realise that the will of the flesh must be overcome by the development of a spiritual mind, which desires only the things of the spirit of God. So we read in Philippians chapter 2: “... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both *to will and to do* of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). Notice this, God does not enable us to do his will only – he inculcates within us a *desire* to do that will also. Every aspect of the process is designed to give God the glory; we can’t even claim the desire to follow Him as our own. God works within us to develop a “will”, or desire, to do his will, and that working is a consequence of receiving the Living Word that operates upon our minds (1 Thess. 2:13). Every aspect is a work of God, that He, not the natural man is glorified.

This point is emphasized in Romans 9 by the use of a number of Old Testament citations, which we could do no better than to scrutinise them carefully. The first is a reference to Isaac: “Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but *In Isaac shall thy seed be called*” (Rom. 9:7). The citation here is to Genesis chapter 21.

The context of Genesis 21 is that of the sending away of Ishmael, Abraham’s first son. Sarah beheld the handmaiden’s child “mocking”, or “persecuting” (Gal. 4:29) Isaac, for which cause she was minded to send him and his mother away. Again, we have the issue of the flesh against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. At this time, Yahweh spoke to Abraham: “Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for *in Isaac shall thy seed be called*” (Gen. 21:12). Here is the point: both were descendants of Abraham, but only one was the child of promise – the other was sent away.

Isaac's life exemplifies the principle of life from the dead in several respects. Romans chapter 4 describes how Abraham overlooked the natural deadness of his own body, and Sarah's womb, in the faith that God would bring about a conception according to His Promise:

“being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb. He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief: but was strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Rom. 4:19-20).

Here was Abraham and Sarah's faith – life from that which is dead. But notice how Romans 4 goes on to show how that our faith follows the same pattern: “... now it was not written for his sake alone, that [righteousness] was imputed to him, But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed *if we believe on him that raised up Jesus from the dead ...*” (Rom. 4:24). Abraham believed in life out of death, and we as disciples of Messiah also believe that though he was delivered for our offences, that he was raised again the third day, as promised through the prophets of old.

There is another well known example of Isaac symbolically rising from the dead. Genesis 22 describes how that Abraham was instructed to take his son, and to offer him up for a sacrifice upon the mountain of God's choosing. But if Isaac died, how could the promises be fulfilled through him? The answer is that the promises will be brought about by the resurrection and immortalisation of those who follow Christ, and Isaac was exhibiting this principle. Abraham believed that even if he did slay his son, Isaac would be raised again for the promises to be fulfilled. So the Divine Commentary speaks of these things:

“by faith, Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: *accounting that God was able to raise him up*; from whence also he received him in a figure” (Heb. 11:17-19).

Here is the same point being made as in Romans 9: salvation is through the mercy of God, and not according to the works of the flesh. It is through resurrection to a newness of life, and the overcoming of the natural mind of the flesh. Notice in this passage from Hebrews 11, that Isaac is described as “his *only begotten* son”. In actual fact, this was not the case: Abraham had already begotten Ishmael, the son of his Egyptian handmaid, as we have seen. But in terms of the outworking of God's purpose, though he was a natural descendant, he is not even acknowledged. He was sent away, and had no part in the fulfilment of the promises, only the son of promise was counted as the seed.

Returning to Romans chapter 9, the Apostle next directs our attention to the experiences of Rebecca, and her birth of two sons. Even before they were born, “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). So it was that one would become a man of the flesh, and one of man of the spirit. The account in Genesis described how even before the two were born, there was an enmity between them: “the children struggled together within her” and she went to enquire of Yahweh. She was told, “Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people: and the elder shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:22-23). She was to give birth to two heads of nations, and the struggle going on inside her showed the principle that there would be an enmity between them all their days.

In this troubled state, Rebecca epitomises the struggle that exists between all men of faith: an inward struggle between the desire to serve Yahweh, and the lust of the flesh to serve Sin. Romans chapter 7 recounts the struggle of the Apostle Paul:

“we know that the Law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not, for what I would that do I not; but what I hate that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the Law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me” (Rom. 7:14-17).

Notice the point here: Paul had “sin” dwelling within him, so that although he delighted in the Law of God “after the inward man” (vs. 22), that law of sin warred against the law of his mind (vs. 23). Just as Rebecca had an inward struggle between the flesh and the spirit, so did Paul - and so do all who seek to follow righteousness, in a very personal way. But given that the law of sin is powerful, and part of our physical make up, how can we overcome it? Not by the will of man, or the will of the flesh, but by faith in Yahweh’s power to save. So might we, we Paul say “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord ...” (Rom. 7:24-25).

Before we leave the example of Jacob and Esau, there is a further point to observe. Rebecca was told: “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated”, referring to the two personages within her. But the same words are used in Malachi chapter 1 to describe, not just these two, but also the nations that came through them:

“I have loved you, saith Yahweh. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Jacob Esau’s brother? Saith Yahweh: **yet I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau**, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the jackals of the wilderness” (Mal. 1:2-3).

Quite plainly here, the issue is between the people of Jacob, or Israel, and the descendants of Esau, Edom. It was not simply that God loved Jacob as a person, and hated Esau as a person. The same principles follow through to their progeny who showed the characters of Jacob and Esau: one is loved, but the other is hated for their sins. Here is the point of Romans 9 again: both descended from Abraham, yet each family were judged loved or hated not according to being Abraham’s literal seed, but how they were to develop. Natural descent was not enough to become partakers of the promises - spiritual Edomites would be cursed.

The next citation in Romans 9 comprises the words of God to Moses:

“... is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion upon whom I will have compassion. So then, it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Rom. 9:14-16).

The quotation here is from Exodus chapter 33. The context is that of Israel given over to idolatry in the absence of Moses, whilst he was receiving the tablets of stone, engraved with the commandments. Moses sought an assurance that Yahweh would go with the people, and bring them into their inheritance. Moses said, “I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the Name of Yahweh before thee; **and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy**. And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there can no man see me and live” (Exo. 33:18-20).

Again, notice the point: Yahweh would not have mercy upon the whole congregation because they were physically derived from Abraham. Rather, he would show mercy “on whom” I shall shew mercy. That is, Divine favour is obtainable only on an individual basis. In a similar way, we should take care to note that just because we are part of a group of people called the brethren of Christ, or “*Christadelphians*”, that alone does not mean that we will have mercy. Blessing and cursing will be on an individual basis, and not group association. Let us therefore take heed to how we shall stand personally in the day of coming judgments.

Notice here, Moses was told he could not see the Face. What he saw, and had proclaimed to him was Yahweh’s “goodness” and “glory”. These things come together again in 2 Corinthians 4, in connection with our relationship to the One Greater Than Moses:

“... God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of *the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*” (2 Cor. 4:6).

Moses was given a partial vision: he could not see the face. Likewise, the Law that came to him was a mere “shadow” and not the very substance of heavenly things to come. But we behold the glory in its fullness, “in the face of Jesus Christ”. This glory is further defined as: “the light of the glorious gospel of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6), which is received by those who have ears to hear, and eyes to see. What a great privilege it is to be a partaker of these things, and how wonderful that they come to us through grace, and not Law!

The next example that the Spirit through Paul directs us to is that of Pharaoh. There is a difference here, between this and the other examples given inasmuch as the others were examples of faith, but Pharaoh is an example of hard-heartedness. The point is being made that God can be glorified through his judgments against the ungodly, just as in his favour extended to the righteous. Pharaoh was raised up, and his heart hardened in order to provide the circumstance whereby the mighty power of Yahweh was declared and made known by both Jew and Gentile. Verse 17 of Romans 9 reads:

“for the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth” (Rom.9:17).

Comparing the account in Exodus, we find a number of occasions where the record states that Yahweh hardened Pharaohs’ heart, and several which state that he hardened his own heart. The solution is that Yahweh placed Pharaoh in circumstances wherein his natural rebelliousness would take over. Yahweh hardened his heart in that he place Pharaoh in those circumstances, whereas Pharaoh hardened his own heart, in that it was his choice to rebel, and he freely exercised that choice. It was of God in that He knew which situations were needed to “raise up” a man devoted to sin, to be judged according to His Purpose, that His power be made known throughout all the earth.

But how can this be so? Some say that there is a moral issue here: Pharaoh was only hard-hearted because of the operation of Yahweh bringing particular circumstances to bear upon him. If it was God who hardened his heart, why is he then judged for being hard-hearted? The next reference of Paul in Romans 9 directly addresses this point:

“Nay, but O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the

clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?"
(Rom. 9:20-21)

Here is the point: Yahweh is the potter, and the clay. Literally we are clay, being made from the dust of the earth, sharing the earthy nature of our first father. But as a potter is quite at liberty to choose what type of pot he is going to make, even so Yahweh has power over the clay to form a vessel to honour, or dishonour – and it is simply not for us to question why he has done so. However, there is a righteousness in all the works of Yahweh: Pharaoh was a man devoted to Sin, with his empire standing in Scripture as being emblematic of Sin. He was a man of the flesh, outside of the scope of Yahweh's promises, to return to the dust from whence he was made. He received no less that what he deserved, and Yahweh in bringing circumstances to bear upon him that hardened him was doing nothing more than to provide circumstances suitable for the exercise of his own rebelliousness.

The next example brought to bear in Romans 9, is a most interesting use of two passages of Hosea. Speaking of those who are called by grace, the Apostle refers to: "even us whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? As **he saith in Hosea**, I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall come to pass that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there shall they be called the children of the Living God." (Rom. 9:24-26).

Here then, Paul is expressly speaking of the Gentiles being called as well as the Jews, and is citing Hosea to illustrate the point. However, when we go back to the actual quotations in Hosea, we find that they are specifically speaking of the Jews only. So in Hosea 1, we read in verse 10:

"Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered, and it shall come to pass that in the place where it was said to them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God" (Hos. 1:10).

The quotation is highlighted, but notice the subject of the prophecy is "the number of the children of Israel". Again, the other quotation is in chapter 2, and verse 23:

"And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people, and they shall say, Thou art my God"

Notice again, the words cited, and look at the context in this chapter – again, it is referring to Israel. How then, is the Spirit using this passage in Romans chapter 9, in the context of Gentiles? The answer lies in the fact that Hosea is speaking of Israel in her cast-off (9:17), *Lo-Ammi* stage. Hosea was to call his son Lo-Ammi, which means "not my people", "for ye are not my people, and I will not be your God". Although it is a fundamental truth that God still has a purpose with Israel, and that their receiving in again is one of the foundation principles of the Gospel, it is also true that through their fall, salvation is made open to the Gentiles. The point here, is that Israel in her *Lo-Ammi* stage occupies a position like that of the gentiles: "not my people" "not having obtained mercy". But as we have seen, God will have mercy towards those He wishes to extend mercy: with both Jew and Gentile coming together in a common need. If salvation can yet be extended to Israel, no longer individually His people, through their unrepentant sinfulness, so it can be extended to Gentiles who are also in a like circumstance.

A related principle of Romans 9, which has a bearing on the matter, is seen in verse 6:

“... they are not all Israel which are of Israel”

That is, Israel after the spirit. As it is written again, “he is not a Jew which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Rom. 2:28-29).

Israel after the spirit consists of men and women from varying natural origins, who are Jews inwardly. Collectively, they are the “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16), and the principles of their redemption are the same: being called out from the Gentiles, being called the Children of God, and their recognition of Yahweh as being their God.

Returning back to Romans 9, the next illustration brought to bear on the subject, comprises of several quotations from Isaiah the prophet: we shall look at one of these:

“... and Esaias said before, except the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, *we had been as Sodoma, and been made like unto Gomorrah*” (Rom. 9:29).

Notice the contrast here: the Spirit cites the example of Israel in Hosea, and applies it to Gentiles in pointing out that the Jew and Gentile have a common need, being in the same position. But here, Israel is spoken of as being like particular Gentile powers in their destruction, namely Sodom and Gomorrah. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was absolute, with only Lots’ family being spared. If Israel had been totally destroyed, they would have been in no better a position than Sodom and Gomorrah – no better than the Gentiles who were fit to be destroyed. They could not plead their natural standing as being Abraham’s seed to be spared destruction, for morally they had become as corrupt as Sodom, to the extent of even being called the Sister of Sodom (Ezek. 16:46). But there was a remnant, as there has been down through the ages; those who refused to conform to the ways of the heathen.

Bringing our considerations to a conclusion, we have seen that the central and recurring theme of Romans 9 is that mercy is extended to men and women according to our Father’s own selection in righteousness, and not according to either natural descent (as the Jews supposed), or by natural works of the flesh. We have men of faith to look to as examples: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and we have men of the flesh to look to as examples of unbelief: Esau, Pharaoh, and Israel in their *Lo-Ammi* state. But as we begin to focus our minds upon the emblems before us, we see the great extension of love in the providing of a sacrificial Lamb for the forgiveness of our sins. Yahweh’s righteousness and power is declared in both the judgment of wrongdoers, and the mercy shown to those who have faith in him. And in our Lord Jesus Christ, we see that great righteousness shown in both of these things. Like Rebecca, we have an inward struggle to contend with, the law of sin against our desire to do good – but Messiah condemned sin in the flesh. Destroying that which has the power of death by taking it to the cross, Jesus declared God’s righteousness in providing a means for mercy to be extended to men and women who share the faith of Abraham of old. He has been set forth “to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his Righteousness” (Rom. 3:25). We therefore trust in him, and his power to save, looking to the day when the kingdom shall be restored to Israel.

Chris Maddocks