

HOW THREE BOOKS SAVED ROMANS 9-11

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During my first thirty years of teaching Scripture, I did my best to avoid Romans 9-11. I am embarrassed to say that when I arrived at this dreaded section, I would always beg one of the other pastors to substitute for me. In my defense, I am not alone in this avoidance. Many preachers have skipped over these chapters as though they scarcely existed. Just to mention one example: Alexander McLaren, the great nineteenth-century preacher, in his collection of thousands of sermons from the entire Bible there is not a single one on Romans 9-11.

This section of Scripture is not only complex; it's worse than that. At least to me, it seemed irredeemably repugnant. On the surface, Paul seemed to be portraying God as a horrible monster who created a few people to eternally saved and most people to be eternally damned – and all by divine fiat. Apparently, according to Paul, God is a self-glorifying “enigmatic deity of naked power” (thanks to Austin Fischer for that phrase). So, I avoided the passage. It knew that this apparent portrayal contradicted God's clear self-revelation of himself in Jesus Christ: that is, a God of pure self-giving, self-sacrificing, co-suffering, unconditional, irreversible, irrevocable love toward all of his creation. So, again, I simply avoided the passage until further revelation (not a bad strategy, in hindsight).

Now I understand that many people react to that caricature of God as an apparent “monster” in this passage. My Calvinist brothers and sisters might even say that that violates the main point of the passage. They may say, “who do you think you are (in your limited intelligence and finite understanding) to question God's sovereign choice?” Their question seems somewhat legitimate in light of the passage which, at first glance, does seem to go like this:

It begins with Paul's personal problem of anxiety. He expresses the “great sorrow and deep anguish in his heart” over the obvious fact that, apart from a few exceptions, *Israel does not recognize Israel's Messiah!* Which raises a huge question: Does that mean that God's election of Israel was an almost total failure? And, then, Paul astonishingly seems to defend this failure with: “Well, it's OK that most Israelites (and most human beings) will end up eternally damned. As long as there's a remnant, it's OK. Sorry, the rest just weren't elected. That's just the way it goes. God can do what he wants. I mean, consider poor Esau, for example, He's not only *not* one of the elect; he's actually hated by God. I mean it's right there in the Bible! God loved Jacob but hated Esau! God chose to elect (and, therefore, love) Jacob and he chose to *notelect* (and, therefore, hate) Esau. It's right there, plain as day, in black and white. Furthermore, it's a fair assumption, that God hates every human being except those lucky few that he has decided to save. (On a side note: some well-known preachers, based on this favorite text of theirs, like to scream at their congregation that God, in fact, does hate most people). Anyway, since God is God, he can do whatever he wants. If he chooses to love someone and to hate someone else, that's his prerogative, right? Who are we to question his sovereign glory? Isn't it true that he is the potter and we are the clay? Can the clay accuse the potter of being

unfair? Of course, not! And if God chooses to create someone destined for eternal damnation, does he not have the right? Hell, yes, he has the right!

Well, there you go. Seems pretty clear. Can you see why I avoided this passage? You can also see why many Christians, based on this text, end up with a doctrine called “Double Predestination.” Many Christians hold to this truly monstrous doctrine without fully realizing what it is they believe they believe. When they hear it described, they usually deny it. But it’s unavoidable. If you truly believe that God sovereignly elects some individuals to be eternally saved then his non-election of the remaining people (the vast majority of people) necessarily means he has predestined most people to be eternally damned. I’m sorry, but the only proper response to that horrific doctrine is Douglas Campbell’s, “Double Predestination be damned!”

But then something happened in my reading of Romans 9-11. I discovered the importance of reading the entire passage *as a whole*. I discovered the corporate and covenantal nature of election, as opposed to the election of individuals to their eternal destinies. But it was three books in particular that exploded like bombs in my brain and that completely changed my life and transformed this passage into one of my favorites. I now think that these chapters in Romans contain one of the most beautiful and inclusive proclamations in all of divine Scripture.

Those three books were: CRUCIFIXION by Fleming Rutledge, THAT ALL SHALL BE SAVED by David Bentley Hart (DBH), and PAULINE DOGMATICS by Douglas Campbell. I will be brief but here are the main points about Romans 9-11 gleaned from these three authors that changed my life:

1. The typical reading of this passage is the exact opposite of what Paul was teaching! As DBH puts it, “This is perhaps the most depressing paradox ever to have arisen in the whole Christian theological tradition.” The traditional (Calvinist) reading of this passage – *that God’s election is an arbitrary act of exclusion and damnation* - is “quite literally the very teaching that Paul went to such great lengths explicitly to reject” (DBH). I would add that the traditional reading of Romans 9-11 is a classic example of a foundationalist reading (see Campbell) or of what I would call “Flat-Bible-Biblicism” or “modern literalism.” Whatever you call it, it is one of the most horrifying examples of how not to read Holy Scripture.
2. Instead, Paul presents a *temporary exclusion* of unbelieving Israel, of rejected Esau, and of the Gentiles. Paul presents a *temporary distinction* between vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy. We know that Paul presents all of these as temporary and as hypothetical “what ifs” because he goes on to say clearly that this cannot possibly be the correct answer to his dilemma. We know that these exclusions/distinctions are temporary and hypothetical because:
3. Esau was not permanently “hated” or excluded but, instead, was ultimately reunited with Jacob. It is Jacob who says to Esau (not the reverse), “seeing your face is like seeing God’s.” And as far as Paul’s fellow Jews, his conclusion is that “all Israel will be saved.”

And regarding the Gentiles, he refers to the “fulness of the Gentiles.” Finally, he explicitly teaches that there is no final distinction between vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy; “that was a grotesque, all-too-human thought that can now be chased away for good” (DBH). In fact, his great and beautiful conclusion to his entire argument is that all human beings are vessels of wrath precisely so that all human beings may be made vessels of mercy (Romans 11:32). This echoes his earlier, “there is no distinction.”

4. Here’s the beautiful summation of Paul’s proclamation in these chapters (and why I now love this passage): God’s plan did not fail in the end! His election and calling of Israel were irrevocable and unconditional. His love will eventually triumph over Jewish unbelief. God’s love will win. *All Israel shall be saved*. The believing remnant within Israel will make the rest of Israel Holy, serving as a saving sign to the rest of Israel. This same narrative, this same logic, is then expanded to the whole of humanity! God loves humanity as much as he loves Israel. Israel then stands as a saving sign to the rest of humanity. Just like God will not let rejected Esau go, just like he will not let unbelieving Israel go, God will not let humanity go. God is a covenantal God, committed to us all permanently and irrevocably. God created everyone to love and to live with him and, because he’s God, he will get exactly what he wants. Douglas Campbell’s conclusion to this passage: *God is love. Love never lets go. Therefore, God never lets go*.
5. This conclusion is perfectly consistent with the rest of Paul’s letter to the Romans. “God justifies the ungodly” (Rom. 4:5); “there is no distinction, everyone is ungodly, no one is good, no one seeks for God... all have sinned” (Rom. 3:10-11, 22-23); “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6); “in Adam all die, in Christ all are made alive” (Rom. 5:12-21; I Cor. 15:22).

Amen. Praise the Lord. Romans 9-11 is now my friend. It fits nicely with the modern praise chorus: Your love never fails, and never gives up. It never runs out on me.