

God's Sovereign Mercy to his Chosen Ones

Romans Series

By Barry Minsky

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Bible Text: Romans 9:14-24

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Quacco Baptist Church

215 Quacco Road
Savannah, GA 31419

Website: www.quaccobaptist.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/minsky

Our Scripture reading today—if you will turn me and read it from your bulletin or from your copy of the Word of God that you have with you—Romans chapter nine beginning with verse 14.

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

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 honored 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—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?¹

God will bless us as we look into this portion of his holy Word.

¹ Romans 9:14-24.

As I had said last week, this is an extremely difficult passage in God's Word. It is difficult to understand and also it is difficult to apply to our lives. But we are going to try today to take a close look at just a couple of aspects of this passage and then we will probably finish up with chapter nine next week and maybe even get into chapter 10.

The first thing we want to look at is the fact that God says over and over again in this passage that he is the one who chooses. He is the one who picks people for various areas of service. He is the one who chose us and redeemed us to be his people. This is a difficult concept as I said, because human beings like to think that we have the power, that we have the authority, that somehow it is something that we do that affects God's willingness to save us and to give us his grace.

But the Word of God makes it abundantly clear that, as it says in the book of Jonah, "Salvation is of the Lord."² And we are going to take a look at this.

First of all, we see at least three people in this passage who were selected by God through different areas of service. It says in verse seven of Romans chapter nine... well, let me begin with verse six.

"But it is not as though the word of God has failed."³

Now what does he mean by that? Well, he has just said that in the last eight chapters that God has a wonderful plan for salvation, that here it is. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. His wonderful plan for salvation was that the Christ of eternity would come down from heaven to earth, would take on the form of a man, would willingly live a perfect life in this environment and then would willingly die the most horrible death in order to provide a salvation for his people.

And I can imagine the apostle Paul looking around and thinking in his mind, but what about my kinsmen? What about the Jews? God made a lot of problems to Israel. Well, why is it that I am not seeing many of the Jewish people coming to know Christ? Why isn't it happening?

And he answers it in a very clear way by saying this. "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel."⁴

In other words, within this large group of people who make up the people of Israel, within this large group that would be called the nation of Israel, there is a smaller group. The Word of God refers to that group frequently as a remnant and this smaller group is that group that truly believes. And they are the real Israel. Not everyone who is descended from Israel really belongs to Israel.

² Jonah 2:9.

³ Romans 9:6.

⁴ Ibid.

And he goes on. “And not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but /Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”⁵

Now we have to remember what he is talking about here. At this stage in the game, well, shortly after the birth of Isaac it would have been possible for Abraham to say, “Well, I have two sons. I have a son by the name of Ishmael and I have a son by the name of Isaac.”

Ishmael came first. He was the first born of Abraham, but God chose Isaac. And he makes it abundantly clear that it is not through Ishmael that the line to the Messiah would go, but instead, it would be through Isaac.

“This means that it is not the children of the flesh, not just those that are born of the flesh,”⁶ those that are the natural children of Abraham who are the children of God,

...but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return and Sarah shall have a son.”⁷

Well, God is basically saying to Abraham, “I have discounted Ishmael as being the one through whom the promise will come.” He made certain promises to Ishmael. Ishmael was a great nation, but he would not be the one who was blessed as being one through whom the line to the Messiah would be counted.

So we see the first person who is chosen in this passage is, in fact, Isaac.

But then Isaac had children. And the next person that it talks about in terms of one being chosen is one of the sons of Isaac. And the wording is very important here.

I am going to begin Romans chapter nine verse 10. “And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man...”⁸ She was having twins. There were two male children who were to be born of her, our father Isaac.

“Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad...”⁹

Now why is God putting this in? He wants to tell us that his choice, that his picking of one over the other had absolutely nothing to do with anything that they would do. It had absolutely nothing to do with whether Jacob was a better person than Esau or Esau was a better person than Jacob. It had nothing whatever to do with these things. It was simply the choice of God.

⁵ Romans 9:7.

⁶ Romans 9:8.

⁷ Romans 9:8-9.

⁸ Romans 9:10.

⁹ Romans 9:11.

“Though they were not yet born...”¹⁰ And obviously it is... “And had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue...”¹¹

And, by the way, the word election, it is a word in the Greek it is actually a... this is a transliteration of a Greek word εκλεκτος (ek-lek-tos’) and the word simply means to choose. It is not just a spiritual word. It could be used of just about anything. Let’s say I... there were a pile of hymnals and I said, “I am going to take this hymnal, but I am not going to take the others. I have chosen. I have taken.” I could have said, “I have elected this hymnal.” It is as simple as that. It means to choose, to pick out of a group.

Well, they, “Had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election,”¹² or his purpose in choosing, “might continue, not because of works but because of his call.”¹³

Do you see what the Lord is saying here? I want you to understand, folks, that these were two babies in a womb. They were about to be born, but not yet and they hadn’t done any acts that could be called good or bad. And yet I had made a choice.

Now, as I said last week, you know, I would have made the opposite choice to be perfectly honest with you. If you look at the life of Esau, he was a strong man. He had conviction. He did things very, very well. You look at Jacob, Jacob was the one who stole a blessing. Jacob was the one who deceived people and yet, you know, God says, “Before they did anything good or bad, I picked this one.”

It says:

She was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”¹⁴

What an interesting thing we have here. First of all Isaac is chosen over Ishmael. Secondly, Jacob is chosen Esau and in both cases it is the younger that is chosen and we have no indication whatsoever that God was looking at anything that they would do in the future. He makes a big point of saying, “That is not it. Nothing good or bad that they have done,” only that God’s purpose of election might continue.

Now there is a third individual here who was selected, but selected in a totally different way. And we are talking about Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. And we read in chapter nine and verse 17, “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’”¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Romans 9:12-13.

¹⁵ Romans 9:17.

Pharaoh was chosen, but he wasn't chosen to be one of the children of God. He was chosen to be an example. He was chosen so that God through his power could demonstrate the fact that he was, indeed, the powerful God.

And, you know, the very essence of this, when we look at the relationship between Pharaoh, Moses and the children of Israel, we read of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. And this is significant because God many places in the Word of God talks about the hardened heart and he talks about the soft and gentle heart. And the Word of God tells us, for instance, that as believers God has come and taken the heart of stone away from us and given us a heart of flesh, a heart that has emotions, it can beat, it can do all these things.

Now what about Pharaoh? Some will say, "Well, Pharaoh hardened his heart."

That's right. It says Pharaoh hardened his heart. But before Pharaoh ever hardened his heart we read God saying that God was going to harden Pharaoh's heart.

Let me give you a couple of examples. The first time this is mentioned in the Bible is in Exodus chapter four where we read this. "And the LORD said to Moses, 'When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power.'"¹⁶ Now listen to these words. "But I," God speaking, "will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go."¹⁷

Yes, Pharaoh hardened his heart, but God first says, "I am going to harden Pharaoh's heart."

God has the power to utilize this individual in such a way that he could demonstrate his power. Had Pharaoh not had a hardened heart, had he not said no over and over and over again to the people of Israel as far as their being allowed to leave the land when one plague after another came upon his people. He would look and think and then he would say no again. He hardened his heart. If he had not done that, God would not have been able to demonstrate his power in enabling the people of Israel to escape from Egypt, opening the Red Sea, making it possible for them to go across.

But I want you to notice this. Again in Exodus chapter seven the next time this idea of the hardened heart is discussed it says in verse three, "But I," God speaking, "will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt."¹⁸

And when we begin reading more and more about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, the next few times we read of it it doesn't really tell you who hardened Pharaoh's heart. It just says, "Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened."¹⁹ And in chapter seven and verse 14,

¹⁶ Exodus 4:21.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Exodus 7:3.

¹⁹ Exodus 7:13.

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.’”²⁰

Finally, when we get down to the eighth chapter of exodus we read, “But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also.”²¹

How do we put together God hardening Pharaoh’s heart and Pharaoh hardening his own heart?

Well, it is pretty clear in this passage in the Word of God that it is God who acts first and it is God who chooses and it is God who hardens the heart of this man so that with a hardened heart he was unable or unwilling, I should say, to allow the children of Israel to leave the land of Egypt and go to the Promised Land.

Now, I am not going to read them all for you, but I did a study of the word “hardened” in the book of Exodus and overwhelmingly it says that the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Take a look some time. Do a study yourself.

Ok. When we think of the hardening of the heart—and here we are talking about God’s activity of hardening a man’s heart so that he would not let the people go—would there not be places in the Word of God that tells us that God does the exact opposite? In other words, the God who has the power to harden a man’s heart, doesn’t he also have the power to soften a man’s heart? The God who can rule over a man and harden his heart so that he will do exactly what God wants him to do and exactly the wonderful miracles that God wanted to be seen by the people, would be seen by the people. What about God opening and softening a heart?

Now, we don’t have time for as many examples as we could, but I picked one that I think clearly brings this out. And we are going to jump over to the book of Acts in the New Testament and in Acts chapter 16 we read of a woman by the name of Lydia, Acts chapter 16. And I am going to read beginning with verse 12.

And from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God.²²

This term “worshiper of God” does not imply that she was a Christian. She wasn’t. She didn’t know the Lord Jesus Christ. But what it was was the person who was called a

²⁰ Exodus 7:14.

²¹ Exodus 8:32.

²² Acts 16:12-14.

worshipper of God was a Gentile who was inclined to begin in the practice of the Jewish faith. And she was a worshipper of God.

It says this. “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”²³

What does this mean? Well, it means, first of all, that her heart was closed. You don’t open something that is already open, right? I mean, if you are going to open a heart, the heart has to be closed. You don’t open an open door. You open a closed door. And so her heart was closed just like every other heart. We read in the Scriptures over and over again that man in his condition apart from Jesus Christ is one where he cannot come to God unless God does something first.

Well, the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

“And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ And she prevailed upon us.”²⁴

Now what I just said, the opening of a person’s heart, hearts are closed and nobody has a native ability to go of himself or herself to the Lord Jesus in faith. That is what it says, for instance... and, again, I could just multiply the instances in which this is said, but I have picked just one.

In John chapter six and verse 44—and those of you who have been involved in our Sunday evening and Wednesday evening studies know that we looked over this passage in some detail quite some time ago. It says, verse 44, “No one can come to Me.”²⁵

Now the word “can” is not a word of permission, but it is a word of ability. It is a word that I as a little child used incorrectly many times. I would say to my mother, “Mom, can I go outside?”

And my mom, trying to teach me a little bit of good English would say, “Well, of course you can. You have two feet. I mean, you know, there is a door. Of course you can go outside. That is not the question.”

And I said, “Oh, yeah. May I go outside?”

And we learn the difference between permission and ability. Well, this is ability. That is what is being talked of here.

“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.”²⁶

²³ Acts 16:14.

²⁴ Acts 16:15.

²⁵ John 6:44.

²⁶ Ibid.

God has to act before the human being has the ability to go to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, ok. We have seen this that God chooses. And that is the primary emphasis of this very passage in God's holy Word.

But now Paul goes on to bring up a couple objections that people might have to this teaching. And, as I said, it is a hard teaching to understand. How can we say, you know, God is the one who makes these decisions, God is the one who chooses? It is a very, very difficult thing to say.

Well, Paul has a way of dealing with it. He brings up the objections that he knows he is going to hear from other people. And there are two of them that are brought up in this passage. Right after the... God talks about the whole issue of Pharaoh's heart being opened, excuse me, Pharaoh's heart being hardened, the Lord through the apostle Paul explains this very, very carefully.

It says... excuse me. This is right... I am sorry, right after we have the statement regarding Jacob and Esau, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated."²⁷

Paul brings up a possible objection which I am sure he has heard many times and you may have heard this, too.

"What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?"²⁸

Basically, what the person is saying here, if we want to put it in modern vernacular English, it would be something like this. Folks, that is not fair.

That is what he is saying. How could it possibly be fair for God to look at two little babies who are in a womb and say, "I am going to pick this one but I am not going to pick that one"? How is that fair?

Well, god answers the question very clearly.

Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.²⁹

Basically he is saying to us, "You don't really understand. This is all in God's authority. He is the one who has the power, ability and right to make these choices."

Well, we might want to look briefly at where this quote comes from because where it says, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on

²⁷ Romans 9:13.

²⁸ Romans 9:14.

²⁹ Romans 9:14-16.

whom I will have compassion,”³⁰ it is a quotation from the Old Testament, from Exodus chapter 33.

In that passage Moses asks for something very great. He wants a tremendous privilege from God. He says, “I want to look on you. I want to look at you, God.” And God allows him as the Word says, not to see his face, but to see his hind parts.

Now by that it actually means God is enabling him to see the effects of God and to understand God better.

You know, people are not normally given that privilege. Have you seen God? I have not. This was very special. And so we read—and I am going to begin with verse 17 of chapter 33 in Exodus.

And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

Moses said, “Please show me your glory.”

And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’”³¹

Well, he is given an incredible privilege, one that had not been given to other people.

And so, in order to explain why God is doing this he uses terms that basically say, “That’s my choice. I make the decision on who receives what and how I dispense what I have to give.”

And he says, “And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”³²

Wow. When you look at that you ask the question: How could it be that God chose to give this incredible privilege to Moses? But he hasn’t given it to me. He hasn’t given it to you, didn’t even give it to those who lived in his day. Joshua didn’t receive that. Caleb didn’t receive that. Only Moses, because God said, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”³³ “That’s my choice. I have the right to do it and it certainly is fair because I am the God of eternity and the one who can do all of these things.”

Well, there is one other objection that is brought up here and the objection we find in Romans chapter nine again and verse 19 after he has developed this whole discussion of

³⁰ Romans 9:15.

³¹ Exodus 33:17-19.

³² Exodus 33:19.

³³ Romans 9:15.

what he is going to do and what he is not going to do, where he says he will have mercy on whom he will have mercy.

And somebody, then, will bring up this objection, verse 19. “You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’”³⁴

In other words he is saying here, you know, “If he is the one who chooses and if Pharaoh didn’t have any choice, his heart was hardened, he couldn’t do anything about it, Moses was the one who was granted this great privilege. Abraham’s son Isaac was selected and not Ishmael to be the one whom through the line would go, Jacob was chosen, not Esau, then how can he find fault? He is the one making all these decisions. How can he look at me, then and say, ‘You are guilty of something?’”

Do you know what his answer is? The answer is that he doesn’t ever really answer the question. He doesn’t answer the question. He rather scolds the person who asks it.

Listen to the Word that he says here. He says, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”³⁵

And then he goes on, “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?”³⁶

In other words, to put it in the modern language he said, “Shut up.” Isn’t that what he is saying? He is saying, “You know, this is none of your business. Keep quiet. You don’t understand.”

He says, “Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’”³⁷

One of the things that I enjoyed—and I have told you this in the past—was cutting opals. I used to love to cut opals. And, you know, when you cut an opal, if you grind too far you have passed all the fires and throw the thing out. It is not worth anything. If you don’t cut far enough then you have missed the fire. It hasn’t come up yet. And you have to be exact in what you do.

Well, I would never purposely destroy an opal, but I am saying I have had many where I cut a little bit too far and, “Oh, I have to throw that one out.”

There are possibilities that one who makes things will make something for an exalted purpose. It will be a vase to hold beautiful flowers. And there are others who out of the same lump of clay back in the olden days might make a spittoon.

Well, I would rather have that in which I can put the flowers, wouldn’t you?

³⁴ Romans 9:19.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Romans 9:20.

³⁷ Ibid.

Do you see what I am saying? You can make what you want. And this is what is being said here.

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 honored use and another for dishonorable use?³⁸

He has that right, doesn't he? If it is my clay, right? I mean, out of that clay I can mold anything I want. I can mold something that is very beautiful or I could... Let's say I want to make something really ugly out of this thing and I can do that and I have a right. That is my clay, my equipment to do anything I want.

God then goes on to explain exactly what he is talking about. He is making a distinction between those who come to know Christ and those who don't. And here are his words.

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—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?³⁹

We don't have time to get into this in great detail, but basically what he is saying here is he is the molder. He is the one who makes the decisions about whether a particular person will be created in such a way and given such ability at the right time in his life that he will come to trust in Christ. And the others, we are told here, he will endure. That is the word that is used. He will endure with much patience. And he calls them vessels of wrath that were prepared for destruction.

Now, we know that God, in fact, does his will. And nobody can stop him from doing that which he desires. The Word of God tells this all over the place. In Isaiah, for instance, “Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’”⁴⁰

In the book of Ephesians, a passage that we studied quite a long time ago:

He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have

³⁸ Romans 9:20-21.

³⁹ Romans 9:22-24.

⁴⁰ Isaiah 46:10.

obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.⁴¹

He is the molder. We are the clay.

Just one last passage before we close. You will remember that there was a great king, Nebuchadnezzar, and Nebuchadnezzar was humbled by God to the point that he ate grass like the animals. And finally when by God's grace he received his senses back again he split up and honored God and this is what he said in the book of Daniel.

But at the end of that period, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'⁴²

I praise God that we have a God of power, a God who can accomplish his will knowing that he has loved me with an everlasting love. I can be assured that his will will not be thwarted and that there will never be a time when I will be pulled out of the hand of God. I am there and I am secure.

And if you know Jesus as your Savior, the wonderful molder has given to you life. May it be that you will rejoice in it.

If there is anyone here who does not know the Savior, oh, I would challenge you to come to him. There are some who will say, "Well, if that is God's choice, what can I do about it?"

Well, God uses means. And one of the means may be the preaching of the Word of God today and it may be your turning from unbelief to faith in Christ that you might have everlasting life. What a wonderful gift he would have given to you if you did, in fact, turn to him.

Let's pray.

Our Father, you are the God of all grace. You are the one who raised from the dead the Lord Jesus. You are the one, Father, who teaches us. We have been discussing—as we do from time to time because we simply go through books in the Bible—we have been discussing a very difficult topic, one that we will discuss and then we will go on to another topic, but, Father, we want you to teach us. We want you to help us to understand your power, your ability, but, above all, your eternal love for us. Help us to

⁴¹ Ephesians 1:9-11.

⁴² Daniel 4:34-35.

demonstrate your grace by sharing that message of love with others around us and praying that lost men and women may come to faith in Jesus Christ. Use us we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.