Romans 9:24-33: Who Are God's People?

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As we approach the the final section of Romans 9, hear Paul putting forth his conclusion in answer to the question that has been the focus of this chapter – Is God a liar? This question has arisen out of a very serious situation for an Israelite such as Paul. It is obvious that Israel has rejected Christ, is not, therefore, being saved, and in fact are turning their backs on God. It is equally obvious that the Gentiles are embracing Christ, is, therefore, being saved, and in great numbers. So what does this mean for God's people Israel? What does it mean to be a Jew if it doesn't gain salvation from God? Did God lie when he promised to save his people?

Let's take a moment to recall what Paul has argued for in this chapter in response to these questions. Put simply, it is individual, unconditional, election unto salvation. Let me walk us through this chapter ever so briefly:

- Paul has shown that not all ethnic Israel is saved. There is a fundamental difference between those who are Israelite by birth, and those who are spiritual Israel by regeneration (v. 6). Not all Israel is true Israel.
- Paul then argues that it is God's prerogative to save whom he wants to save, which he does when he unconditionally elects individuals to salvation. He chooses according to his purposes alone, whom he will save. You see this played out on the pages of the Old Testament (Isaac / Ishmael and Jacob / Esau). On account of these two points, God has not lied; he has kept his promises.
- Though some might object that this is not right, or that

it violates our perceived understanding of ‘free will’, Paul reminds us that God is God and we are not and therefore we should watch ourselves. We are not, as the creature, in a position to argue or question the Creator. God is pursuing his glory in doing things this way and we should worship him for doing so, rather than question him.

- In the verses immediately previous to vv. 24-33, Paul has articulated that it is God’s prerogative to save whom he will from the mass of perdition that is the fallen human race. In doing so God pursues his own glory above all things, and does not in any way forfeit his justice, righteousness or love.

In these final verses Paul circles back to the original question and issue raised in vv. 1-5. If God is accomplishing his purposes in salvation, and he is doing so by differentiating between ethnic Israel and spiritual Israel, then one final question needs to be answered – Is God REALLY glorifying himself in the salvation of both Israelites AND Gentiles? Or to put it differently, does God’s people include both Israelites AND Gentiles? To a Jew of Paul’s day an affirmative answer would be abhorrent.

vv. 24-26

In these verses Paul quotes Hosea and Isaiah to remind us that were it not for the pure, simple grace of God, none would be saved. Remember, all of us were born into Adam (cf. Romans 5) and as a result we did not deserve salvation, only damnation. It is the grace of God that intervenes and calls us to salvation; no work that we do, no striving, nothing can save us. Were it not for God’s electing grace, we would all be damned. So, Paul reminds us, whether you are a Jew or a Gentile your only hope of salvation is the grace of God.

These two texts in Hosea were addressed to the 10 apostate

northern tribes of Israel before the Assyrian exile in 722-21 B.C. They describe both the rebellious condition of Israel ("not my people" / "not beloved") and her prophesied restoration ("my people" / "beloved" / "sons of the living God"). As Sam Storms reminds us, these texts were given to Israel as a promise of their restoration, so why then does Paul apply them here to Gentile salvation?

The answer is simple. Paul is not a dispensationalist. Here's what I mean by that. Paul understands that there has only ever been ***one people of God, and its NOT ethnic Israel***. To put it in New Testament language, it is ***the Church***, ***which is the sum of all those who have ever come to salvation in Christ by faith regardless of which side of the cross they may have lived.*** George Eldon Ladd explains,

"Paul deliberately takes these two prophecies about the future salvation of Israel and applies them to the church. The church, consisting of ***both Jews and Gentiles, has become the people of God***. The prophecies of Hosea are fulfilled in the Christian church."

What this means is simple.

"the Old Testament prophetic promise of Israel's regathering in covenant faith to Yahweh is being progressively fulfilled in the salvation of believing Jews and Gentiles in this present age, that is to say, in the Church. ***The calling out of Gentiles from among every tribe, tongue, people, and nation is the prophesied restoration of Israel, for the Church is the continuation and maturation of Israel's believing remnant.***" (Storms; italics his)

As an aside, for all of you who are still holding onto your dispensationalism, you need to give it up. Scripture demands it.

vv. 24-26

Paul returns to his statement in v. 6 and continues to argue that God has ALWAYS intended to save only a remnant of Israel. This time he goes to the book of Isaiah three times for his proof. This idea of a remnant is nothing new, it is part of the fabric of the Old Testament and is explicitly stated there. As John Piper puts it, "The Jews thought they were all included because they were Jews, and the Gentiles thought they were not included because they were Gentiles. God is gathering a redeemed people in a way that will stop the mouth of all presumption and will give hope to the most despairing." ***God's people are not defined by ethnicity but by faith. Therefore his people are not defined by anything other than faith in Christ.***

vv. 30-33

So why then are Gentiles being saved and not Jews? Paul's conclusion is easy to articulate: (cf. Storms)

v. 30 – Gentiles are saved because by sovereign grace they attained righteousness in the proper manner: **by faith**.

vv. 31-33 – Israel is NOT saved because in arrogant pride they pursued righteousness in an improper manner: **by works**.

These are ideas given, endorsed and perpetuated in the Old Testament, from both the Law and the Prophets – salvation comes by God's grace through faith. (cf Ephesians 2:1-10)

Conclusion

Now that we are at the end of this chapter, we can do a brief Q & A to review the message of the chapter:

Q1 – Why are the Jews not being saved and the Gentiles are? Has God lied when he made his covenantal promises?

A1 – No God is not a liar. According to vv. 6-29 God has chosen some in Israel to be saved, but not all. God is not obliged to save every ethnic Israelite. (v. 8) This is God's

prerogative because his goals in salvation are very specific. He has chosen to unconditionally elect individuals to salvation "in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls." (v. 11) So, Paul says, the freedom of God in election is the reason why only some Jews – and now also a great many Gentiles (v. 24) – are being saved. (cf. Piper)

Q2 – So who are God's people if it is not ethnic Israel?

A2 – God's people are all of those who come to God by his grace through faith. As Paul aptly summarized elsewhere – "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." (Galatians 3:28-29)

Q3 – How is a person saved?

A3 – Paul presents a two-sided answer that needs to be maintained in the correct order. The first happens first, and the second, second – God's election and personal faith. On the one hand, a person is saved because God has chosen him unconditionally (vv. 11, 21-23) and called him effectually to himself (vv. 8, 24). God is the decisive actor in the matter of salvation. On the other hand, a person gets saved by faith and not by works, namely, ay "attaining righteousness". (v. 30) Paul knows that we cannot attain righteousness on our own (Romans 3:9-10), it needs to be attained for us which is exactly what Christ has done (Romans 10:4). So the way we 'attain' righteousness is by personal faith and repentance (Romans 9:32; 10:9-10). These things are not a work, but a gift of God given to those whom he has elected and called. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Donald Grey Barnhouse (1895–1960) used an illustration to help people make sense of election. It gives us a good idea of what it is being spoken about here by Paul. Barnhouse asked people

to imagine a door over which were the words from Revelation: “Whosoever will may come.” This demonstrates the free offer of the gospel. Every man, woman, and child is invited to believe in Jesus Christ and enter eternal life. When a person believes and steps through the door, and they turn around to look above the door from the inside they will see these words from Ephesians: “Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.” Election from the foundation of the world, followed by grace and faith actuated in our lives.

Q4 – How is a person damned?

A4 – The text is clear as to why a person is not saved – they pursue salvation by works and stumble over Christ (vv. 32-33; cf.1 Peter 2:8). Israel does not come to faith in Christ because he is a stumbling block ; but others will not come to Christ because he is foolishness (cf 1 Corinthians 1:23)

Romans 9 has articulated and defended the doctrine of personal, unconditional election unto salvation. In this chapter Paul has also defended it against a number of objections. But there is one objection that he doesn’t deal with in chapter 9, that is answered in Romans 10. The objection is as old as theology itself and it can be stated like this – ‘if God elects unto salvation, then we don’t have to witness or preach since he’s going to save whoever he wants anyway.’ As we see, Paul’s words in Romans 10:5-17 destroy this objection.