

**CHOCOLATE WAFERS**  
**Romans 9 and 11**

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We continue in our sermon series from Paul's letter to the church located in the capital city – Romans. Last week we started the most difficult passage in the entire letter, chapters 9-11. We have approached chapters 9, 10, and 11 like eating an Oreo. Last week, we started with the cream-filled center, chapter 10, by far the most delicious and easiest part to devour. But just like eating an Oreo, now we eat the somewhat dry chocolate wafers, chapters 9 and 11.

Today's sermon will be more theologically dense than normal. But to do justice to the rhetorical flow of Paul's argument in Romans 9, 10, and 11, we can't skirt the weightier issues. Those wanting to be entertained by sermons should now catch up on their sleep. Night, night.

The reason we've gone through Romans chapter by chapter is we want to understand what Paul is saying in the context of his letter to the church. Sermons that are just cherry-picked using a passage in Romans lack context and fail to reveal the true meaning of Paul's message.

There is a trend in contemporary reading of scripture to put on 16th Century glasses. To be sure, what the Reform theologians have to say is important, and I encourage you to read them, but you've got to remember that they come a millennium and a half (1,500 years) AFTER Paul writes. Today I want you to take off your 16th Century glasses and put on 1st Century glasses, to read a 1st Century document from a 1st Century writer named Paul. We have to understand Romans 9, 10, and 11 in the context of Paul's message to the Romans, not the Reformers' message to 16th Century Europe.

Let's go back to Romans 1 to remember the central theme for the entire letter. Romans 1:16-17 – “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’”

The central message of Romans is the gospel, the story about Messiah Jesus, the grace of God to all believers, both Jew and Gentile.

The purpose of chapters 9, 10, and 11 is to reveal God's mercy being worked out to achieve the larger purpose of the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles.

When people read our present passage (Romans 9-11) out of context, they miss the meaning. For example, someone might read 9:13 – “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” – as pointing to individual predestination, God willy-nilly sending one to heaven and the other to hell. One problem: this passage has nothing to do with individual assignment to eternal destruction or glory.

On the other extreme, others would read 11:32 out of context: “For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.” “There you have it,” says a liberal reader of the

text. “Everybody is saved in the end; God shows mercy to all.” Again, cherry picking the passage and not reading it in the context of the overall argument penned by the Apostle.

Let’s go back to the cream before we go to the wafers. The cream filling, chapter 10, sits in the center of chapters 9, 10, and 11. The key theological ideas, the creamy center, should influence your interpretation of the wafers on both sides (chapters 9 and 11). Look at 10:4 – “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” Paul is saying the law is not to be denied, but the law is fulfilled in Christ. And for whom is the law fulfilled? Both Jew and Gentile who confess Jesus as Lord (cf. 1:16-17).

The central verse of the whole section is found in Romans 10:9. “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

There it is. Jew or Gentile – all find salvation the exact same way. There is not one path to glory for the Jew and another path for the Gentile. All get there by believing Jesus is Lord.

Look at 10:13. “For whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Whoever means Jew or Gentile. Whoever says “Jesus is Lord,” meaning He is the crucified and resurrected Messiah finds salvation regardless of his ethnic heritage.

Having seen the Christ-filled center (chapter 10), let’s go back to the end of this section, the end of chapter 11. This section ends by saying (v. 32) that God has shut up everybody in disobedience through the law that He might show mercy to all who believe. And then Paul reminds us (v. 34) that none of us know the mind of the Lord. And (v. 33), how unsearchable are God’s judgments and how unfathomable His ways.

So many folks are afraid to leave a little mystery to God’s sovereignty. To try to penetrate every corner of the infinite sovereignty of God with your very finite mind is a recipe for ruin. Paul himself says, “I’ve explained it the best I can, but you need to know God doesn’t answer to you or to me. His purpose is grace to both Jew and Gentile, but don’t be afraid to leave a little mystery uncovered.” Mystery is so hard for some people who have to have all the answers. They prefer a bad answer over honest humility.

But, if you don’t have a pat answer, then you have to have faith and trust that God is good. Ah, faith – there it is again.

Let’s go back to chapter 9, the top wafer. We know what the cream is: If you confess Jesus as Lord, you’re saved, whether you are Jew or Gentile. So let’s go back and look at the wafers.

Beginning in chapter 9, the first thing we see is

### **I. Paul is sorrowful that Israel has rejected her Messiah (9:1-5).**

Look at 9:2 – “I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.”

Paul himself is a Jew, and his own personal experience is much like the experience of Israel as a whole. Paul was following the law, trying to seek salvation through obedience to the law, and found on the road to Damascus that salvation only comes through the crucified and resurrected Christ.

The second major argument in Romans 9 is

## **II. God has not failed (9:6-29).**

Look at verse 6. Having learned that Paul lamented the current unbelief of his kinfolk (vs. 1-5), in verse 6 we read, “But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.” Some of the Jews were arguing, “If we don’t have a place in God’s salvation, then God has broken His promises to us. God’s word has failed.” Paul responds, “The unfaithfulness of some Jews does not call into question the reliability of God’s promises.”

Turn back to Romans 3:3-4a. “What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be!”

The majority of the Jews in Paul’s day were unfaithful because they rejected God’s Son, their Messiah. Nevertheless, we learn in this passage that God has preserved a faithful remnant (v. 27) or a portion of Israel. In verses 6-29, Paul answers the Jews who claim that since God has chosen them from among the nations to be elect, their election is irrevocable. Therefore, God must keep His promises to them even if they look to the law for salvation rather than to Jesus as Lord.

Paul’s response reminds them that the way God works is a mystery. God constituted Israel by fulfilling the promise to Abraham only through Isaac, then by choosing Jacob, the youngest son, over Esau, the eldest son. God shows mercy on anyone God chooses. According to His purposes, He makes vessels destined for destruction and vessels destined for glory. Humans are God’s creation and have no right to question His sovereignty manifested in His choices. God is not accountable to you, Paul is saying; you will be accountable to God.

Verse 8. “It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.” The implication is that parentage, racial descent, a distinctive Jewish way of life, or geographical borders do not describe who Israel is. In God’s eyes, Israel is “created not by blood and soil, but by the promise of God.” Abraham had eight sons. Of these eight, only Isaac is the child of promise.

His point is that the only true Israel that exists is the one that God brought into being through promise and call. Simply tracing one’s lineage back to Abraham does not confirm that one belongs to the children of promise; it only confirms that one is Abraham’s child according to the flesh.

Paul continues to show how all Israel is not really Israel. After citing how God chose only one of the sons of Abraham (he had eight), he now cites how God then chose only one of the twins born to Rebekah. Before the twins had done anything good or bad, God chose not the first born, but the second born. God decided (v. 13) that is Jacob, not Esau.

Being a child of promise has nothing to do with one’s works – what one does, good or bad – but, rather (v. 11), just the purpose and promises of God. To say God loves Jacob and hates Esau is Semitic hyperbole. It means God has preferred Jacob over Esau (Matthew 10:37; Luke 14:26).

Esau’s rejection simply means that God did not intend to use Esau as the instrument of fulfilling God’s purposes in history. It did not mean he was excluded from Isaac’s blessing (Hebrews 11:20, by faith Isaac blessed both Jacob and Esau), despite his selling his birthright (Hebrews 12:17).

The central point in Romans 9:15 is that our salvation is not based upon our merit but, rather, based upon God's mercy. "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy."

The Jesus event does not envision God as any different than God has always been, Paul is arguing to the Jews. Paul's presenting unpredictable mercy throughout Israel's history should make it less surprising that God could and would shower unexpected and undeserved mercy on Gentiles by including them in His mercy.

Just like God chose one son of Abraham, and just like God chose one son of Isaac, God even used Pharaoh's disobedience for God's own glory. The point to ponder isn't whether Pharaoh is responsible for Pharaoh's hardened heart. But God uses Pharaoh's rebellious heart to accomplish God's own good purposes. Pharaoh's rebellion allowed God to demonstrate His power in redeeming His people Israel.

And then the illustration of the potter and the clay. Look at verse 20. "The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?" Paul is deflating the Jewish audacity to think they can dictate to God. Instead, it is God who dictates. Paul is maintaining that pots do not argue with their potter about how they were made or for what purpose they are to be used. Therefore, God is absolutely free to say who God's people really are – the people of faith.

These statements: "God loved Jacob and hated Esau," even before they had been born or done anything good or bad, or "God raised up Pharaoh and has mercy on whomever He chooses or hardens whomever He chooses," has nothing to do with any argument about individual predestination to salvation or damnation. This is about the purposes of God among the nations. God's divine purpose is to show mercy to all nations. The emphasis falls on Israel's corporate election, as evidenced by use of the terms that refer to groups instead of individuals – "My people," "My remnant," "the disobedient," "Israel." Individuals in this passage refer to persons whom God selected as agents to advance God's historical purposes and the plan of salvation amongst the nations – both Jew and Gentile.

Paul is trying to say God didn't put up a "Help Wanted" sign and wait for applications. Rather, God raises up persons to achieve His divine objectives. For example, God used Pharaoh, but He also used Cyrus, the king of Persia (Isaiah 45:1). God used Pharaoh to oppress Israel in their Egyptian captivity, but he used Cyrus to deliver Israel from their Babylonian captivity. God's use of individuals does not take away their volition or make them simply puppets on a string. It's a much bigger mystery than that.

All of this operating of God is for the purpose of proclaiming the greatness and power of His name (9:17) and to show the riches of His glory on objects of mercy (9:23).

Our basic problem in approaching this passage is that we read it anthropocentrically. What does this mean about me and my salvation? That's not the question. It's theocentric. What does this mean about God providing mercy to all people through both the obedience and disobedience of some? It's not about Jacob and Esau as individuals; it's about the role they play in God's salvation history drama among the nations.

The whole point of Israel's being elected, the whole point of choosing Jacob over Esau, was that Israel could be a light to all the nations, that His salvation might reach the ends of the earth (Isaiah

49:6; 42:6; Acts 13:47). It wasn't to choose some and leave others out; it was to work out the rising and falling of nations and peoples according to the purposes of God that all who believe might be saved, both Jew and Gentile.

The key word in the whole passage is one word: Mercy. Mercy in 9:15. Mercy in 9:18. In fact, how does this whole section conclude (11:31-32)? "So these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all." The purpose of election is to have mercy for all who believe.

Paul's point is to show that God's purpose is to save, and one can only be saved by God's mercy. Paul is not deliberating about whether an individual person is predestined to heaven or hell. That's not even remotely contextual to the argument.

He simply continues the theme of the letter: Salvation does not depend on human exertion or worthiness, but, rather, only on the merciful grace of God. His purpose is to show that Israel is not saved by race alone (being a descendant of Abraham), but by grace alone (being a believer in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ). In fact, the whole passage is to argue that the unchosen, the Gentiles, can also be part of the people of God (v. 25). The once-hated descendants of Esau are now called "children of the living God" precisely for the reason that Jacob and his descendants have always been and ever will be God's beloved, because of the gracious and loving embrace of the merciful and sovereign God. Like Israel, their identity as God's people is determined not by works but by the one who calls.

So the question is "If God's word did not fail (v. 6) – His covenants, His promises, His giving of the law – why is it the majority of the Jews have rejected their Messiah? Why are the very people who should have been prepared for His coming by the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms turned their back on God's Son? Paul is arguing that Israel's problems are rooted in the refusal to accept the beliefs expressed in chapters 1-8, that God reckons as righteous only those who have faith in Christ. Ethnic Israel cannot rest on her God-given privileges. Israel can only be saved by confessing Jesus as Lord and believing that God raised Him from the dead.

Paul closes out chapter 9 by saying those who were not once God's people (that is the Gentiles) will be God's people, quoting Hosea 2:23. And then he reminds us in 9:27 that "Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved" (Isaiah 10:22).

So how did the Gentiles, who weren't even pursuing righteousness, arrive at righteousness (v. 30)? And how is it that Israel, who was full force after the law, not arrive at the end of the law, that is, Christ? Because – it always comes back to faith – they did not pursue it by faith. They were trying to work their way through obedience to the law. Therefore, they stumbled over the stumbling stone, they stumbled over the Christ (v. 33).

Chapter 10 – the cream of the Oreo. "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. And verse 11, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.

Now, let's finish out with chapter 11 – the other wafer of the Oreo.

### **III. God wants the family tree to be as big as it can be (chapter 11).**

Chapter 11 addresses the question, “Is God, therefore, just done with Israel? Has God rejected his people?”

“No, may it never be!” the answer is in 11:1. Paul himself is an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham and, yes, the tribe of Benjamin. God has not swept Israel into the dustbin. God has preserved a remnant of believing Jews who have circumcised hearts, meaning they believe in Jesus.

The salvation of Jew and Gentile is part of the mystery and purposes of God. God utilized ethnic Israel’s unbelief to pave the way for salvation to Gentiles. Israel’s hardening has resulted in the saving message of the gospel spreading into the Gentile world, where scores have renounced their idolatry and turned to the Living God. Paul is arguing here that God’s including Gentiles in the people of God does not mean Jews are excluded. In fact, God will graft them back in as His people. He argues that if their rejection of the gospel brought blessing to the Gentiles, how much more will their acceptance of the gospel bring even greater riches to the Gentiles and enhance His mission among them?

Look at 11:12. “Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be?” (cf. verse 15).

No, the branches may have died, but the root is still thriving. He gives for an example Elijah. Elijah the prophet, having defeated the prophets of Baal, is hiding, thinking he is the only faithful one left (11:3). “No, I have a remnant (v. 5) – seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”

In the same way, there will be a believing remnant according to God’s gracious choice. But again, it’s grace, it’s mercy. It’s not works. It’s not what Jacob or Esau have done. Rather, it is simply the mercy of God.

Israel has suffered a loss in numbers and is reduced to a believing remnant (v. 5). She has lost the race to attain righteousness because she ran down the road of the law. It is not a catastrophic defeat, however, because God has used it to bring rich results among the Gentiles.

In verses 13-14, Paul directly addresses the Gentiles for the first time in this letter – in fact, the only time. Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles. But, Paul is desperately holding on to his own people without jeopardizing his mission to the Gentiles. In this section about roots and shoots, Paul makes clear that the root is God’s covenant with Israel. The wild branches are the Gentiles who have been grafted in. And if they can be grafted in to God’s glory, then certainly God can re-graft a remnant branch of Israel.

Paul does not believe that the Jews will get an automatic bye in judgment because of their election or for the sake of the patriarchs (11:28). In fact, he is agonizing over their current state of disbelief (9:1-3). But God’s love for the Gentiles does not diminish God’s love for Israel, as if there were only a limited supply of God’s love to go around. The boundless love by which God has embraced all humanity in Jesus Christ does not invalidate the first love that He bestowed on His people Israel. If God shows mercy to Gentiles who are saved by faith, then God will surely show mercy to Israel when they come to faith too.

In the end, God wants to have mercy on all. “For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all” (11:32). That’s the purpose of election. That’s the purpose of God’s mystery of choosing – that He can have mercy on all. And yet, we’re reminded at the end of the day that God’s judgments are unsearchable and inscrutable. God doesn’t owe us an explanation.

Yes, the manifestations of God’s election and mercy in history have happened in a way that no human could anticipate and few actually appreciate. Now we see in a mirror dimly.... We can barely make out what God has done in the past; we are often unaware of what God is doing in the present; and cannot foresee what God will do in the future. We must search God’s word to know that we join with the doxology of Paul at the end of this section, for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To God be the glory forever. Amen.

The Queen’s Gambit has become Netflix’s most-watched scripted miniseries. An orphaned child prodigy becomes a world champion chess player. It’s a PG-13 drama of chess strategy, both making your moves and knowing the opponent’s choices.

God, in the end, is the universe’s champion chess player, able to bring the game to a victorious conclusion by out-maneuvering whatever moves humans or Satan might make. Yes, God sometimes allows individuals or groups to rebel against Him to bring about the greatest good for all. The only way to salvation – always has been and always will be – is to admit Jesus is Lord. It is not race alone, but grace alone that brings us to God’s throne.

You move your chess pieces however you choose –because the master player, God, uses your every move for His own end game. Checkmate. Mystery.

Let us pray.

*(utilized David Garland’s forthcoming commentary on Romans)*