

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 19, 2012**

**SOVEREIGN IN SALVATION**

**Romans 9:1-21**

In Romans 9, Paul tackles some of the hardest, toughest theological questions one could ever face. The Letter to the Romans, as a whole, is Paul's *magnum opus* of Christian theology. It is the most extensive and systematic exposition of the doctrines of the Christian faith in the New Testament.

The keynote of the whole letter, as you probably know, is found in Romans 1:16-17, where Paul says: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes," both Jew and non-Jew alike. "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed" – a righteousness not our own, a righteousness we can never attain or achieve on our own – "a righteousness that is by faith from first to last."

In recent weeks we have focused on Paul's explanation of the gospel of grace in Romans 3, on the futility of living a performance-driven life, and the provision and sufficiency of God's amazing grace shown to us in the person and work of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Before that, we looked at the ongoing struggle with sin that Paul describes in Romans 7, a struggle with which many, if not all, of us can identify. Then we looked in Romans 8 at Paul's decisive declaration of the promise and assurance of victory in the struggle, beginning with the announcement in verse 1 that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," and concluding with the confident assurance in verses 38 and 39 that nothing in life or even in death will be able to separate us from the love of God we have received and experienced in Christ Jesus our Lord. For all of us who have received this gift of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ and Him alone, you can be sure of this: There is no condemnation and no separation. Nor, by God's grace, will there ever be. That is awfully good news, isn't it?

Then we turn to Romans 9, and immediately we are confronted with one of the thorniest and most disputed doctrines of the Christian faith. I'm talking about the doctrine of God's sovereignty, particularly God's sovereignty in salvation, which is sometimes called the doctrine of election or (to use a word that is frequently misunderstood and often arouses negative passions) predestination.

You see, not everyone accepts or believes the doctrine of election. For many Christians and non-Christians as well, the concept of predestination is hard to swallow. There are many who find it offensive or even blasphemous. The doctrine of predestination was at the heart of a rift between two evangelical giants in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, John Wesley and George Whitefield. Wesley, the founder and leader of the Methodist movement, viewed predestination as a blasphemy against God and an affront to grace. On the other hand, Whitefield, perhaps the chief human instrument of God in the great spiritual awakening that took place in the American colonies and the British Isles in the 1730s and 40s, understood election or predestination to be one of the essential "doctrines of grace" taught in the Scripture. Wesley

and Whitefield were both sincere, passionate believers, tireless in their devotion to the gospel. Both were greatly used of God as instruments of awakening and revival in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But on this doctrine they could not agree. One saw it as an affront to the gospel of grace. The other saw it as a demonstration of grace, and a source of comfort and joy in the life of a believer.

For many people, the whole concept of election or predestination just doesn't seem fair, involving as it does the belief that God has pre-determined who will be saved and who will not be saved, that before any of us were even conceived in our mother's womb, before any of us had ever done anything good or bad, God had decided who would be the objects of His grace and favor. To many people today, and perhaps even to many of us here today, it just doesn't seem fair. I understand that objection. But I believe God is more than fair. I believe the doctrine of election or predestination, as Paul lays it out for us in Romans 9, 10, and 11, is a vivid demonstration not of unfairness on God's part, but, as Isaac Watts wrote long ago, "Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!" I hope you will see it for yourself as we examine what God is saying to us through the apostle Paul here in Romans 9.

Even among Christians who affirm the biblical doctrine of election (of whom I am one), not everyone *likes* it. Not everyone is *comfortable* with it. In part, I think, it is because many people misunderstand it or misapply it and make it into something it is not. Ultimately, I think, the doctrine of election is one of the unfathomable mysteries of God, and no one can comprehend it completely. At least my finite mind cannot. As Paul himself says when he wraps up his discourse on election and God's sovereignty in salvation at the end of Romans 11:

How deep are the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
 How unsearchable are His judgments,  
 And His ways are beyond our understanding.  
 Who has fully known the mind of the Lord?  
 Who has ever been His counselor?  
 (Romans 11:33-34)

But we can and should seek to understand what God *has* revealed, what He *has* made known to us in His Word. And I believe Paul is God's messenger here in Romans 9 to help us better understand and embrace the truth of this "doctrine of grace" – which is really what it is.

### **THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**

The main point in Romans 9, the big idea Paul wants us to grasp, is that *God is sovereign*. When we say God is sovereign, we are talking about His absolute right, authority, and power to govern all things – *all* things, everything everywhere in the universe – as He chooses, without any limitation imposed by human choices or circumstances beyond His control, because there are no circumstances beyond His control. To say that God is sovereign is to say that God is ultimately in charge of all things, including our eternal destiny. It means that God and God alone is God. It means that no one and nothing can ultimately thwart God's plans and purposes.

The sovereignty of God means that God has the freedom and power to choose whatever and whomever He wills to accomplish His purposes for His own reasons, whether or not *we* are able to discern His purposes or understand His reasons. Paul uses the analogy of the potter and the clay in verse 21 to explain this: As a potter is free to make whatever he/she chooses with a lump of clay and is not answerable to the clay for what he/she chooses to do with it, so God is answerable to no one but Himself in the exercise of His sovereignty.

This explanation of God's sovereignty doesn't sit well with a lot of people, and maybe with some of you, because you think it makes God out to be a tyrant who exercises His power in arbitrary or capricious ways. If that is the case, let me remind you that the God we worship, the God who sent His own Son into the world to die for us as an expression of His undying love, the God who created everything in the universe and sustains it by the power of His word, the true and living God who is over all things – He never exercises His sovereign power in an arbitrary or capricious or reckless manner, but always in a manner consistent with His holy character and His redemptive purposes. We may not understand God's reasons for what He does or chooses to allow. But that doesn't mean He has no reasons. It just means that His reasons are hidden from us. Beyond us. Known only to Himself.

Sometimes God acts in ways that just boggle our minds. In the end, we must simply bow down in trust and let God be God.

God is sovereign not only in the sense of His power to do or act as He chooses. He is also sovereign in grace. Which is to say, His grace is an expression of His sovereignty. Grace, as you know, is not something God is required or compelled to give. It is His sovereign prerogative to grant it or to withhold it. He owes grace to no one – not to you, not to me, not to anyone. Grace that is owed is not grace, for the essence of grace is that it is given free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will.

God's grace is an expression of His sovereignty. In His sovereign grace, He has chosen to provide salvation for us, through the saving work of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross for us. So, God's sovereignty is not a threat to us. It is actually the basis of our hope. For apart from His grace, His free and sovereign grace, there would be no hope of salvation, no hope of heaven, no hope of peace with God, no hope for eternal life in God's kingdom, for any of us. God is sovereign. And His grace is an expression of His sovereignty.

The Bible is full of examples of God exercising His sovereignty in making choices. God chose Abraham, for example, to be in a covenantal relationship with Him, to receive the blessings and promises of the covenant, and through his offspring, to be a blessing to the whole world. God chose Isaac, the son of His promise to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, instead of Ishmael. The Lord chose Jacob instead of his brother Esau to inherit the covenant blessings.

It doesn't stop there. God chose the people of Israel, the descendants of Jacob's twelve sons, to be His special people. In Deuteronomy 7:6, Moses says to the nation of Israel:

You are a people holy (set apart) to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession.

When the chosen people were in slavery in Egypt, God chose Moses – a murderer, an escaped felon, a fugitive from justice who had spent forty years on the back side of the desert – to lead them out of Egypt.

When Saul, through repeated acts of insubordination to God, forfeited his right to be king of Israel, God chose a young shepherd boy named David instead of one of his older, more qualified brothers to become Israel's king.

But why? Why did God choose David and not one of his brothers? Why Moses and not someone with a better resume? Why Abraham? Why Isaac and not Ishmael? Why Jacob instead of Esau? Why Israel and not Egypt or Ethiopia or Syria or Babylon?

Ogden Nash famously wrote:

How odd of God  
to choose the Jews.

It may seem odd or incomprehensible to us, but that is what God did. Why did He choose the Jews? Was it because they were superior to the peoples and nations around them? Was it because they were bigger or stronger or smarter or more virtuous than the other nations? Was it because they were better or more spiritual than everyone else?

Moses gives the answer in Deuteronomy 7, where he said to the people:

The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the promise He made to your forefathers that He brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery.... Know therefore that the Lord your God is God. He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands (7:7-9).

It wasn't because of anything in them. It wasn't because of their credentials. It wasn't because they had somehow proved themselves worthy. It was because God chose to lavish His love on them. It was because God chose to bless them. It was because God chose to reveal His glory in them. It was because He made a covenant with them, and God is always faithful to His word. It was His sovereign choice.

Paul hammers this point home in Romans 9 by his illustration of the experience of Esau and Jacob. These two brothers came from the same womb. They had the same mother. They had the same father. But even before they were born or had done anything good or bad – as it says in Romans 9:11 – in order that God's purpose in election might stand, God said that the

older would serve the younger. He said that the younger brother would receive the covenant blessings. He chose Jacob over his brother Esau.

Why?

It wasn't because of anything they had done.

It wasn't because one was better than the other.

It wasn't because of their credentials or character.

It wasn't because of their heritage. They were, after all, twin brothers. And the choice was made before they were born.

So why did God choose Jacob and not Esau? That is the million dollar question. And the final answer is: Because He wanted to. Because He is sovereign. God chose Jacob because it pleased Him to do so. It was for the pleasure of His will. And if something pleases God, whether I can comprehend it or not, it must be good. He chose to bless Jacob as a free expression of His grace. From first to last, from beginning to end, it was grace, all grace, and nothing but grace. Because nobody deserves God's blessing. Nobody deserves to be chosen by God. Nobody.

I have more to say about the sovereignty of God, and especially about His sovereignty in salvation, but it will have to wait until next Sunday. Between now and then, take some time this week to read Romans 9-11. You may want to read it more than once. In fact, you may find it profitable to read these three chapters every day this week. As you read, ask God to increase your understanding of this "doctrine of grace," and the comfort, peace, and joy found in God's sovereign grace in salvation.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.