Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

In every country of the world, there are popular tourist destinations: For example, in NZ, you have to visit Queenstown, and in France you must visit Paris and the Eiffel Tower, and in Egypt you must visit the Pyramids. But there are also lots of places in every country that very few people visit. Who here, for example, has spent some time exploring TikiTiki (Poverty Bay)?

Well, it can be like this also with the Bible. For example, we *love* Romans 8. Romans 8 is a kind of Bible Queenstown – a place we visit again and again and again. But Romans 9 is a kind of Bible TikiTiki – a place we do not visit often or just ‘drive through very quickly’. And that is because for many believers Romans 9 is hard to understand and controversial, so let’s just read Romans 8 and skip over to Romans 12 and Christian living. But like Romans 8, Romans 9 was given to deepen our love for God and our understanding of His grace to us in Jesus Christ. So we must not ignore it.

So what is Romans 9 about? Well, look at the last verse of ch. 8: The message there is that nothing “*will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*.” It is a beautiful and powerful promise. And Paul’s apparent change of subject in 9:1ff seems bizarre and even shocking at first. Why does He do this? Well, remember that Paul wrote this letter to the congregation in Rome. And the congregation there was made up of Jews and Gentiles or non-Jews. Some of the Jews, perhaps many of them, still had a ‘we are God’s chosen people superiority complex,’ but the majority of those in NT congregations were Gentile. So you can easily imagine Gentiles trying to put the Jews in their place by pointing out that the Jews had had their day and it was now ‘Gentile time.’

But this situation also raised theological questions. Paul has just laid out this wonderful promise – nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. But the OT tells us that the Jews were God’s chosen people. So it sure seemed like something had been able to separate the Jews from God’s love for them. Can you see the pastoral questions, then? If God stopped loving the Jews then might He one day stop loving us? Does what happened to the Jews mean that God’s word can fail? Is God, therefore, unjust? And Paul knew that these would be the sorts of questions in the minds of his readers. So anticipating these questions, he asks and answers them himself, to *defend* God, as it were, and to *glorify* God. He wants believers to know that God’s promises are totally reliable.

And that is why I have called this sermon, ‘**God on Trial**.’ It is as if God is the defendant in court and Paul, taking on the role of defense lawyer, not only clears God of any accusation but actually magnifies God’s sovereign mercy in salvation as a basis for hope and trust and thankfulness.

So let’s work through Paul’s defense of God’s sovereign mercy in salvation by noting what He says about God’s **reliability**, God’s **Mercy**, God’s **sovereignty**, and then the **Biblical proof** that Paul provides for what he says about God and salvation.

Now, the Apostle Paul was Jewish. And the first 5 verses of ch. 9 are his expression of personal anguish about the situation of his countrymen. He is just devastated that despite of all of the blessings of being God’s covenant people, as a nation, they have rejected the one the covenant pointed to – the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. But he wants to quickly establish the fact that the fault for this reality rests not with God, but with the Jews, themselves. So he first of all speaks about **God’s Reliability** in vv6-13.
   1. And he does this by going right back to Genesis and the very beginning of the Jewish nation and God’s dealings with Abraham and his sons and grandsons.
      1. When God chose Abraham to be the Father of the Jewish people, He promised him a descendant. But for a long time, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were childless. And you will remember that Abraham took matters into his own hands and married Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar, who then gave birth to Ishmael. But then Abraham and Sarah miraculously conceived and Isaac was born. So now Abraham had two sons. But God was very clear to Abraham, Isaac was the child of promise, not Ishmael.
         1. And that is what **vv7-8** are about. Ishmael and Isaac were both children of Abraham but God chose Isaac, not Ishmael.
         2. So even way back then at the start of Jewish history, being born a son of Abraham did not automatically entitle you to salvation. Look at v8, “*It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise*.”
         3. So salvation has always been about God’s electing choice.
      2. And we see the same thing in vv10-13 in relation to **Jacob and Esau**.
         1. Again, they had the same father, Isaac. They even had the same mother, Rebekah! They were even twins! But look at v11, “*Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad – in order that God's purpose of election might continue: not because of works but because of Him who calls – she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*.’”
         2. So Jacob and Esau were both ‘sons’ of Abraham. Both were within the family of promise. Both benefitted from God’s ‘general’ or covenant provision. They both grew up in a household were God was honoured, which was not the case in the Gentile homes of that time. But Jacob was a ‘child of the promise’ and Esau was not. Jacob was elect or chosen of God and Esau was not. Of these twin sons of Isaac, God chose to show His *saving* love only to Jacob.
      3. So Isaac and Jacob illustrate the truth that God has never saved ethnically but always electingly. It was never about just *being a child*; it was about *being chosen*. It was never about just being Jewish; it was always about being elect.
      4. So the fact that nearly all the Jews of Jesus’ day rejected Him does not mean that God’s promise to Abraham was unreliable. The Jews of Jesus’ day still enjoyed all of the ‘*genera*l’ or covenant blessings listed in vv4-5; they had the temple and the OT and the sacrifices and ceremonies and the promises and the Patriarchs. But God’s purpose of election was now focused on the Gentiles.
2. So God’s word had not failed. God’s Word is reliable. And this is because God is reliable. So Paul moves on next to defend **God’s mercy** in vv14-18. You see, as sinful human beings with limited knowledge, our natural response to what is laid out in vv6-13 is the question of v14 – “*What shall we say then? Is God unjust*?”
   1. I don’t know if scientists have worked out which gene it is yet but one of the biggest genes we have is **the fairness gene**. I am not sure what the nerve is called but there is one just under your kneecap and if you tap it, your leg shoots out. Well, the fairness gene works like that nerve; we have this inbuilt ability to recognize anything that is unfair and we react. Parents hear this from their children all the time. That’s not fair! But the gene is strong in adults too! Don’t worry about that!
      1. And what we read about Ishmael and Esau pokes the fairness gene, right? It just doesn’t seem fair. Isaac’s in, Ishmael’s out; Jacob’s loved; Esau’s hated. And if it was because Esau was a dirtbag and Jacob was an angel, that would at least make some sense, but Paul is very clear: Before Jacob and Esau had done anything good or bad, God had already chosen Jacob and not Esau. And truth be told, Jacob was actually a lying, schemer, his whole life long. So election is not because one person is better than another; God just chooses! This is why we call this doctrine unconditional election. And our first reaction is typically – but that’s not fair!
      2. Well, notice Paul’s response in v15. He quotes God’s words to Moses from **Exodus 33:19**, “*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*.”
      3. And that word “*mercy*” is really important because it speaks to the matter of fairness. Let me explain: If you walked into a shop and there was a sign that said that **shoplifters** will face a $400 fine, and you stole something and got caught, what would you deserve? What would be fair? Punishment – a $400 fine. But if the store owner decided to let you off with a warning, then he has chosen to show mercy. And because he is the shop owner, he is entirely free to punish or to show mercy; it is his choice. And also, just because he chooses to show you mercy does not mean that he then has to let of everyone else who steals from his shop.
      4. Well, we saw last week that God told Adam that if He ate from the Tree of knowledge, He would die. And Adam represented all of humanity. So when he chose to eat that fruit, his sin and guilt became something that every human being would inherit. Remember that New England Primer for learning the letter A? In Adam’s Fall, we sinned all. So even before we do anything ourselves, we have a sinful and guilty nature. This means then that Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and Esau were all guilty sinners who deserved the punishment of death and eternal condemnation. God would have been within His rights to condemn them all. But He chose to show mercy to Isaac and Jacob because He is free to show mercy to whomever He chooses.
      5. And Paul reinforces this truth with what he says about **Pharaoh** in vv17-18. For Pharaoh, we learn, was raised up by God not because God wanted to show mercy to Pharaoh but because He wanted to show His power through Pharaoh. “*So* *then*,” we read in v18, “*[God] has mercy on whomever He wills, and He hardens whomever He wills.”* Congregation, God is under no obligation to save anyone.The wages of sin is death. What we all deserve from God is death and hell. But He chooses to show mercy to some.
      6. Now, there is one very important difference between God and the shopkeeper. And the difference is that while the shopkeeper can simply choose to ignore a person’s guilt, God cannot. Because God is just, sin committed against Him must be punished. So for Isaac and Jacob and you and me to receive mercy, Jesus had to go to the cross and receive the punishment that our sins deserve. He had to receive in His body and soul the eternal wrath of the Father against every single one of our sins. And He chose to do this so that we could receive mercy.
      7. So in actual fact, the whole That’s not fair! way of thinking in relation to Ishmael and Esau and Pharaoh is utterly perverse. Our only That’s not fair! thoughts should be in relation to Jesus who chose to suffer awful agony despite having committed no sin, so that Isaac, Jacob, and you and me could receive mercy!
3. Well, this brings us to where we must ultimately rest on this whole matter as Paul next defends God’s **sovereignty** in vv19-24. The right response to all that has been said is thankfulness, love, worship, and obedience. And that will be explored from ch. 12 onwards. But the wrong response of v19 is addressed first: “*You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who can resist His will*?”
   1. And I am sure you get the question! You have probably even asked it yourself! If God elects, how can a person be responsible for his or her unbelief? But to that question, Paul delivers a verbal slap on the face in v20: “*But who are you, O man, to answer back to God*?” And then he uses the illustration of **a potter and clay** to make his point. Clay turned into a cat food bowl does not complain to the potter about clay turned into a magnificent vase! And this is because the potter is free to decide how he uses each hunk of clay. End of story. And similarly, arguing from the lesser to the greater, God is free to choose to show mercy to one of His creatures and not the other.
   2. But vv22-24 give us an insight into why it is that God only shows mercy to some. We read, “*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*.” The existence of some who will spend eternity in hell magnifies the reality of the mercy that forgiven sinners have received. Let me illustrate it like this: Earlier I spoke about you as a hypothetical shoplifter. Well, imagine two scenarios: In scenario A, there are 100 shoplifters and they are all let off, and in scenario B, of the 100 shoplifters only 10 are let off. Do you think the 10 of scenario B would be more grateful than the 100 of scenario A? I am sure they would be. Why? Because they see the 90 pulling $400 out of their wallets or being taken off to Jail and they know that that is what they deserved. And in the same way, Ishmaels and Esaus magnify the mercy shown to Isaac and Jacob. And knowing that there are people who will spend an eternity in the fire of hell, which is what you deserve also, should fill you with praise and thankfulness and love for the mercy that God has shown you in Jesus Christ!
4. Well, fourthly and finally, to complete His defense of God, Paul appeals to the **Biblical evidence** of the OT to demonstrate that what was happening with the Jews and the Gentiles should not have come as a surprise to anyone.
   1. And he does this with quotations from Hosea and Isaiah:
      1. vv25-26 are quotations from the prophecy of Hosea that we read earlier. 800 years before Jesus was born, God said through Hosea that “*those who were not my people I will call ‘my people*.’” In other words, a time was coming when the Gentiles would become His people. Well, that time had come.
      2. And 700 years before Jesus was born, God said through the prophet Isaiah what we read in v27 about the Jews, that “*only a remnant of them will be saved*.” And remnant means a small part. And now, just a few Jews, like Paul, had believed in Jesus.
      3. And v29 is another quote from Isaiah that emphasizes God’s mercy. God completely destroyed all of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. Well, Israel had become similarly wicked, but the Lord did not utterly destroy His people; He left some offspring, meaning, He showed mercy to some.
      4. So what was happening in the church of Paul’s day was exactly what was prophesied in the OT.
      5. And Gentiles coming into the church magnifies God’s mercy, because not one of them deserve it, and even just a few Jews in the church magnifies God’s mercy because not one of them deserve it!

So I hope you can hear Paul saying. I rest my case. God is *reliable*, God is *merciful*, and God is *sovereign*. The Bible tells me so.

But I hope that you are also more aware of the mercy that God has shown you in Christ than when we first began?

* If you believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, it is not because of your parents, or your membership of this church, or anything that you have done. It is because God chose to show mercy to you in Christ even before you were born.
* And He could do that because the Lord Jesus agreed to go the cross to pay for your sins.
* And it is because God is sovereign in salvation that you can be confident that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.