

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST, PART 11: SALVATION AND DAMNATION

Romans 9 (NASB)

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The Jane Austen novel *Pride and Prejudice* begins with a benevolent father named Mr. Bennet presiding over a house full of five marriageable daughters and his wife. The youngest, Lydia, is very silly and impetuous, seemingly lacking in common sense. This proves to be devastatingly true when, at the age of sixteen, she runs away to live with an unscrupulous military man twice her age, a certain Mr. Wickham. Wickham is a drunkard, a gambler, a womanizer, and a financial ruin. Lydia, almost unbelievably, thinks him to be fine enough to deserve the bestowal of all her feminine gifts, none withheld.

At that time and place society still considered such an arrangement living in sin. Because these two are oblivious to their failings it remains for others to arrange a private marriage ceremony to make an honest man and woman of them. Even as she ascends the stairs to the church for her wedding Lydia Bennet is clueless as to the real cost of her rebellious behavior. She exclaims: "Oh, where is everyone?" as if the extended families should be expected to attend such a travesty of morality.

Mr. Bennet, sitting in the family home at Longbourne, pronounces that Mr. and Mrs. Wickham, because of their disgrace, shall never enter his house. Yet he is soft-hearted toward his silly daughter and his wife who pines for Lydia. He permits a single visit before the wayward couple heads to a military posting far to the north where the scandal might be forgotten.

As the Wickhams visit Longbourne they express not an inkling of any sense of wrongdoing. Not only is there neither regret nor repentance, they both seem utterly pleased with themselves and speak foolishly and insultingly to the family members who have done nothing but love them. They seem to deserve each other, and what they deserve together is exile. Perhaps the final stroke of moral and spiritual insensibility is the fact that a friend of the family has paid Wickham's mountain of debts in order to assure Lydia a chance at life, and Wickham cares not a whit that such a monumental and undeserved sacrifice has been made for him and his new bride.

OUR DESTINY IS IN GOD'S HANDS

The ninth chapter of the book of Romans begins with the Apostle Paul expressing the greatest distress about the eternal destiny of his people Israel: **"I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen"** (Romans 9:1-5).

The reason for Paul's distress stems from his knowledge of God's sovereignty over the eternal destiny of every person. The logic of redemption is inescapable. If God is omnipotent and he has

provided redemption, then all those who rebel against God are most dreadfully not redeemed. They are, in a word, damned, as the King James Bible puts it. As a Jewish man who had believed in Messiah Jesus as his redeemer Paul was painfully aware of the vast number of Jewish people who had chosen not to trust in God and Christ. He hypothesized, speaking from his deep emotion, that he might be willing to sacrifice himself to damnation if it would ensure the salvation of the Jewish people. Of course this is neither possible nor logical because Paul's death could not gain the salvation of even one person, and Christ's death had already purchased the salvation of all who would believe.

You may have friends and loved ones about whom you feel the same way. How is it possible that they could know the truth as a matter of fact and yet choose the path of rebellion against God? How can they not have a rational appraisal of their danger in light of God's sovereignty? If only they could see their sin, they would turn to Christ. Yet many of them don't.

Many people have questioned God's fairness, but no one can escape his omnipotence. The supremacy of Christ means that he has the sovereign right of disposition over every person. Paul acknowledged this when he wrote that Christ **"is over all, God blessed forever. Amen."** Part of Paul's anguish was caused by the fact that God had given Israel every spiritual advantage, yet sin is so destructive and seductive that even those advantages were spurned as the majority of Israelites rejected both God and Christ. Those advantages are spurned today as millions of people within the hearing of the good news of Christ choose to reject it. They will end up in damnation instead of salvation, **"accursed,"** as Paul wrote. No one can change the terms of God's offer of salvation. That's what sovereignty and supremacy mean.

SAVED ACCORDING TO PROMISE

Paul then wants to defend God from one of several accusations with which someone might charge him in light of this scenario: **"But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: 'THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED.' That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants"** (Romans 9:6-8). We discover that divine blessing comes according to God's promises. Human promises can be shaky in their fulfillment, but divine promises are certain. The crucial question is: What exactly is God promising, and how can we fulfill the terms of the promise?

Paul goes on: **"For this is the word of promise: 'AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON.' And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, 'THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER.' Just as it is written, 'JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED'"** (Romans 9:9-13). The whole point is to glorify God by pointing out that there is no salvation apart from God's initiative. Sarah would have had no descendants whatsoever because she was barren, but God caused her body to respond to the fulfillment of the promise of a redeemer through her. Paul makes the same point through the example of Jacob and Esau. Divine blessing was not to be determined by birth order, but by the divine initiative.

He then makes a crucial point about the human side of the covenant. Here he only states the negative. If God's choosing is the crucial factor from God's side, what is it from the human side? Paul states flatly that it is not because of works. Jacob and Esau **"had not done anything good or bad."** Works are irrelevant to the achievement of salvation because nothing we can give to God can induce him to save us. There is no attainment or aspect of fine character which can overcome how damaged we are by sin. We have nothing to offer God.

The statement that God loved Jacob and hated Esau can make us feel that our own prospects are hopeless. If God himself is against us all hope of divine blessing is gone. But the context is vital here and would have been understood better by a Jewish reader. The quote about loving and hating is from the prophet Malachi (1:2-3), who wrote this about 1600 years after Jacob and Esau lived. This statement was made long after the fact of their faith or faithlessness was revealed. Secondly, hate is a relative term here, and in the context of people God created, means "loved less." Thirdly, the quote from Malachi is about the nations which sprang from Jacob and Esau, not the individuals. We need not fear that God is against some of us from the beginning.

NO SALVATION WITHOUT FAITH

I know this for certain because I read the end of the chapter. The positive part of the human side of the promise is faith: **"What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, 'BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED'"** (Romans 9:30-33).

Faith is the means for any and every person to enter into the blessings of the covenant with God. The divine initiative does not proceed on the basis of our works, but on God's promise which is ensured by his character. But let us be clear that the chapter of the Bible which most makes it seem that God just picks people for salvation or damnation also insists that **"he who believes in him will not be disappointed."** That means that God's calling, his choosing, and his predestination are always in connection with faith. I do not say that God chooses us because of faith but never without it. It is his foreknowledge which allows him to do this from eternity past, as Paul wrote in the previous chapter: **"For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined..."** (Romans 8:29). God cannot switch off the attribute of omniscience any more than he can switch off omnipotence or omnipresence.

The sovereign working of God in salvation and damnation always raises objections, some of which Paul answers in this chapter: **"What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! 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 does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy"** (Romans 9:14-16). Paul reasserts the justice of God in salvation and the fact that it all depends on him and his character. That is why our faith can have the greatest confidence! God's faithfulness will not allow him to fail us.

Paul then brings up Pharaoh as an example: **"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'FOR THIS**

VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.' So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires" (Romans 9:17-18). Was Pharaoh a man who would have believed if God had not prevented him? No, the Bible says that Pharaoh hardened his heart against God, especially during the times when God's judgment relented between the successive plagues (cf. Exodus 8:15, 32). Pharaoh was most rebellious when God was being most merciful toward him. This was not a man on the verge of trusting God for salvation.

Many times I have heard people say that they want to trust God for salvation or holy living but they tried and they just can't. Paul, the good debater, raises this objection to God's sovereignty in salvation: **"You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?" (Romans 9:19-22).**

This objection is in two parts: If God deterministically, fatalistically makes some people to be saved and some to be damned then how can we be blamed for our sins? Paul states this in order to reject it. The people making the objection are, in fact, resisting God's will. No one can stop the omnipotent hand of God, but the normal set of every fallen soul is to resist even if crushed. The answer to the question of who resists his will is: "You do—we all do." No one is damned without the active participation of their will.

Secondly, if we grant that Paul had sufficiently proclaimed the faith principle at every opportunity, the real objection becomes: If God gives mercy to undeserving people who believe, why can he not give it to the other undeserving people who do not believe? This second part of the objection fails first because it would be unjust for God to grant salvation without a sufficient payment for our sins. It also fails because it takes the pot and potter image out of context. That picture comes from Jeremiah, and the premise of the prophets is always the same. The Lord spoke through him in 18:8: **"...If that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it."** God's offer of salvation and blessing is always connected to faith and repentance. Those are the unvarying terms of the covenant.

The fact that faith is paramount in the granting of the gift of righteousness is revealed in the next section: **"And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. As He says also in Hosea, 'I WILL CALL THOSE WHO WERE NOT MY PEOPLE, 'MY PEOPLE,' AND HER WHO WAS NOT BELOVED, 'BELOVED.'" AND IT SHALL BE THAT IN THE PLACE WHERE IT WAS SAID TO THEM, 'YOU ARE NOT MY PEOPLE,' THERE THEY SHALL BE CALLED SONS OF THE LIVING GOD" (Romans 9:23-26).** Who are the "even us" whom God called to be vessels of mercy? They are those who had repented of their sins and believed in Christ as their Lord and Savior, namely, Paul and the other Christians! This is not nearly so mysterious as it sounds at first.

Finally, the faith principle is validated in the identification of the remnant of Israel. Which

people of Israelite descent will be saved? **"Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, 'THOUGH THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL BE LIKE THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS THE REMNANT THAT WILL BE SAVED; FOR THE LORD WILL EXECUTE HIS WORD ON THE EARTH, THOROUGHLY AND QUICKLY.'** And just as Isaiah foretold, **'UNLESS THE LORD OF SABAOth HAD LEFT TO US A POSTERITY, WE WOULD HAVE BECOME LIKE SODOM, AND WOULD HAVE RESEMBLED GOMORRAH'"** (Romans 9:27-29). What is the mysterious characteristic which identifies true Israel? How shall we know the remnant when we see it arising in the last days? Paul gives the same answer throughout Romans and every other book he wrote, and it is the same from Genesis to Revelation: **"BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED."** Christ is that stone of stumbling, and all those who believe in him will be saved.

I sometimes hear preachers becoming confused on this matter and saying that racial, political Israel has inherited the blessings of the covenant. This is manifestly false, and it is the omnipotence of God himself which will enforce the terms of that covenant, as Paul wrote earlier in Romans: **"For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith"** (Romans 4:13).

I would give the sobering word to all of us to stop imagining that our unbelieving loved ones and friends are going to heaven because they once prayed a sinner's prayer. We need to help them see their lostness apart from actual faith which is observable in one's behavior. And while we are at it, let us stop offering salvation on the basis of a mere prayer. We have an affirmative responsibility to explain the nature of God and the terms of the covenant. Christ is assembling a choir of worshipers in heaven, not a mob of disaffected people whose hearts have not been submitted to his supremacy.

You see, that is what Jane Austen's character, Lydia Bennet, was rejecting. Lydia was pretending that there was no moral or spiritual superstructure to life which had its source in God and its earthly expression through her own father. She disgraced both God and her father and deserved never to be allowed in her father's house again. And after we get all done feeling superior to her, the bald truth is that we are all Lydias. We are just as insensible toward our sins as she. We have no claim to any sort of favor with the God who holds the keys of heaven and hell.

That why we all need to stop trying to score points with God. There is no point system. Works cannot save anyone, even the best among us. He is simply not offering salvation in that way. Why kick against the faith system? It is the most wonderful release to drop all the pretenses of earning salvation, admit our total lostness, and then rest in the terms of the covenant by faith. These terms are unvarying because of the sovereignty of God and the supremacy of Christ. He will never renege on them.

But let us also be absolutely certain to know that he will not alter them for anyone. Why would he? He has already offered the best deal anyone can ever get, namely, salvation by faith alone, though grace alone, in Christ alone. The security of that covenant is bound up in the sovereignty of God and the supremacy of Christ. That is why it is impossible for the one who trusts in him to be disappointed. I advise you to get crushed by these truths and worship. No other response will do. If you have never done it before, do it today. If you are still breathing, the possibility of salvation remains open.

[clip from A&E/BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice (The Special Edition)*, DVD Vol. II, 1:41:30 to 1:45:35, inside ch. 13]