

HAS GOD FAILED?

by Ray C. Stedman

There is a verse in the book of Jeremiah that comes to mind as we begin to study the ninth chapter of Romans. On one occasion, when Jeremiah was very troubled about some things that were happening to him, he came to God and told him how he felt. Instead of being comforted, as he thought he would be, the Lord said to him, "If you have fainted when you run with footmen, how will you contend with horses?" {cf, Jer 12:5}.

If you had difficulty handling Paul's arguments in Chapters 1 through 8 of Romans, what are you going to do now that we are in the ninth chapter? For, in this chapter, the apostle brings before us some of the toughest questions ever faced by man as he contemplates the actions and workings of God. All the bitter and denunciatory accusations that man brings against God are faced squarely in this chapter.

Perhaps it will be helpful to remind you of the divisions in this letter to the Romans:

1. Chapters 1 through 8 constitute the first major division of the letter and deal with Paul's explanation of the gospel of the grace of God, the full plan of redemption, as God has worked it out. It is a marvelously brilliant explanation -- the best, the most accurate, the most theologically complete detailed explanation that we have in all of the Scriptures.
2. Then, in Chapters 9, 10, and 11, there is a second division that we will be commenting on in just a moment.
3. The third division is found in Chapters 12 through 16.

In Chapters 9, 10, and 11, the apostle seems to start all over again. He has been talking about the grace of God and the gospel of God, and he has given us an explanation of it. But in Chapters 9, 10, and 11, he goes back over it again -- but this time his purpose is not to explain the gospel, but to exhibit it. These chapters are an exhibition of the grace of God.

Many of you have been to Fisherman's Wharf, and perhaps you have gone into the Wax Museum and viewed the exhibitions of scenes from various historic moments and the wax figures of various renowned characters in our national and world history. I don't know whether that kind of thing appeals to you, but I like it. It helps me to grasp more clearly what those historical incidents were actually like.

This is what you have in these three chapters of Romans. It is a demonstration -- in terms of people -- of how God works in human history, how he redeems and saves.

In Chapters 1-8, the apostle has declared that man is actually helpless to save himself. There is not a thing we can do to save ourselves. We have power to choose, we are expected to choose, and we are free to choose, but, nevertheless, as Paul has made clear, God is behind it all. We don't understand that, and so Paul turns the spotlight on Israel to demonstrate just how God works. We will learn many important things from this section of the epistle to the Romans.

This is a sad and rather sobering story about Israel. Here is a nation that counted itself as having an inside track with God, and saw itself as the people of God, the chosen nation close to God, with various advantages which no other nation had. The Israelites regarded themselves, therefore, as having a specially privileged position with God. And yet Paul begins this section with a clear acknowledgment that this nation is far, far away from God. Despite all the possibilities that they enjoyed, nevertheless, they are a long, long way away.

Now, Paul does not come on in anger at that fact, nor does he come on with accusations. He begins, as we will see in his opening words, with a description of the personal anguish that this causes him. Listen to these words:

I speak the truth in Christ -- I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit -- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. {Rom 9:1-4a NIV}

I am sure that to the Jews of his own day the apostle sounded like an enemy. As he preached and taught the riches that are in Christ Jesus and centered and focused everything on the Person of Messiah, the Person of Christ, he became, in the eyes of the Jews of his day, their enemy. This has remained true of the nation of Israel. They see him in that way. Had a Jew read the letter to the Romans, he would have regarded it as a gigantic put-down to the whole nation. Paul's ministry everywhere stirred up the antagonism of the Jews. He made them angry and upset, even violent in their rage against him.

And yet, he is not their enemy, as he himself makes clear here. He is their loving, hurting friend. It breaks his heart that he has to tell them these things. The hurt is real.

Paul tells us that these are not crocodile tears that he is shedding. This is no phony protest on his part, like some people who say, "I'm only telling you this because I love you," and then proceed to cut us to pieces.

"No," Paul says, "my conscience supports me in this, and the Holy Spirit himself confirms that my anguish is genuine and real. It is deep and lasting." He describes it as "great sorrow and unceasing anguish."

I am sure there must be many here this morning who have grieved over a wayward loved one, and I join you in that. If you are grieving over someone you love who is trending away from Christ and the things of God, you know how that anguish is always there beneath the surface of your heart. You may be enjoying yourself outwardly, and you may be at peace in many ways, but it is there, like a deep knot. The moment your thoughts go back to it you feel it -- that unceasing anguish of heart. I don't think there is anything that can be more devastating and more deeply felt than the love and concern of someone who sees another drifting into hurt, destruction, danger, despair, and perhaps even death, and is helpless to do anything about it.

That was the apostle's position. That anguish was so deep that he declares that if it were possible (fortunately, it isn't, but if it were possible), he would be willing to take their place in hell, if only they could find Christ! That kind of commitment is rare in humanity.

In Exodus 32, there is an account of Moses, who said something very similar. He came down from the mountain and found the people dancing around the golden calf, conducting themselves in riotous ways, and he intervened before God on their behalf. "Lord, if it be possible, blot this sin from their lives," he said, "but if not, blot me out of your book," {cf, Exod 32:32}.

That reaches me. I confess that I have loved ones for whom I would be willing, gladly, to die that they might be in glory. I would be glad to give up the rest of my earthly life. But I can't think of anyone for whom I would be willing to give up my hope for eternity. And yet that is what the apostle's heart is feeling. He knows it isn't possible, but he says, "If I could, I would."

And so we begin this chapter with the recognition of the depth of the anguish of Paul's heart. What a lesson this is on how to approach someone you want to help, someone who isn't very eager to receive what you have to say. You never come on -- Paul never does -- with accusations, or with bitter words, or denunciations, or even with the issues that separate you. Paul first identifies with their deep hurt; he feels with them.

I have told you before about the man who said to a friend, "I hear you dismissed your pastor. What was wrong?" The friend said, "Well, he kept telling us we were going to hell." The man said, "What does the new pastor say?" The friend said, "The new pastor keeps saying we're going to hell too." "So what's the difference?" "Well," the friend said, "the difference is that when the first one said it, he sounded like he was glad of it, but when the new man says it, he sounds like it is breaking his heart." That is what Paul is saying here. It is breaking his heart as he has to tell us these things.

Now, part of the reason for this anguish is made clear in what Paul says next. Paul recognizes the tremendous

possibilities that the Jews had and which they seemed to have failed to take advantage of, Verses 4-5:

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.
{Rom 9:4b-5 NIV}

Last week I was reminded of a young man with whom I shared a ministry a number of years ago in Southern California. I was in Southern California this past week, and someone reminded me of the wonderful time we had when this young man came in and ministered with us. He had a brilliant mind, a powerful personality, keen insights into the Scriptures, great effectiveness in what he said, and he was a convincing speaker. This past week I learned that he is now a broken man, having drifted from the faith -- an alcoholic, dying. What sorrow that brought to my heart, as I thought of the great possibilities he had that are now being wasted.

This is the way the apostle feels about the nation of Israel. Look at these advantages -- there are eight of them listed:

First, they were chosen as the people of God. There is no doubt about that. God makes it very clear that he separated this nation -- the descendants of Abraham, the twelve sons of Jacob and the tribes that came from them -- as his people. He called them that: "Behold, Israel is my son," {cf, Exod 4:22 KJV}. He dealt with them as the specially chosen people of God. Gentiles have not always understood that, and many times I think we resent it. Somebody has said, "How odd of God to choose the Jews." But God really did choose them. Their position was different than any other nation of their day, and Paul acknowledges it.

Second, to the Jews was given the glory, Paul says. By that he means the Shekinah, the bright cloud that followed Israel through the wilderness and later came into the holy of holies in the tabernacle and marked the presence of God himself among his people. Centuries later, when the temple was built by King Solomon, the cloud of glory came and filled the holy of holies, and the people knew that God had recognized his ties with this remarkable people and was living among them in a very real sense. They had the glory.

The Jews also had the covenants, Paul points out, these remarkable agreements that God made with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, with Moses and David, in which God committed himself to do things for that nation, and he has never gone back on those covenants. God took the initiative to make these covenants with this strange and wonderful people.

Fourth, Paul says, the Jews had the Law. This was their dearest and greatest treasure, and it still is. A few weeks ago I finished reading the book *In the Beginning* by the contemporary Jewish writer, Chaim Potok, in which he describes how the Jews loved the Torah, the scrolls of the Law. They have a service set aside in which the men of the congregation take the scrolls of the Law and dance with them. Potok records how one of the young lads says to himself, "I wonder if the Goyim (Gentiles) ever feel this way about the Word of God?" Yes, the Law was their greatest treasure. God gave it to Moses -- not to Charlton Heston!

Also, Paul argues, the Jews had the temple worship. Not only did they have the Law, but God had carefully and meticulously described how the people should conduct themselves. He told them the kind of offerings to bring, the ritual to carry out, and he designed beautiful ways of reminding them of the truth that he had taught them through these rituals and services. The Jews had the temple itself, one of the most beautiful buildings ever built by men. It was the glory of Israel, and it was still there in our Lord's day, and even while Paul was writing this letter.

Sixth, the Jews had the promises. Those are still to be found in the pages of the Old Testament -- promises of a time when the Jews would lead the nations of the world. There would be universal reign, a world King, and Jerusalem would be the center of the earth. Government would flow from the city of Jerusalem throughout the whole earth. Those promises are still there, and God means to fulfill them.

Seventh, Paul says, the Jews had the patriarchs, those tremendous men whose names are household words all over the world -- Abraham and Moses and David. We think we are blessed having leaders like Washington and

Jefferson and Lincoln, but even they are not as widely known as these great names from Israel.

Finally, the supreme blessing was that Jesus himself, the Messiah, came from Israel. From the Jews is traced the human ancestry of Christ. Notice that Paul does not say that Christ belonged to Israel -- he came from them. He belongs to the world because, as the apostle adds, "He is God over all, to be praised forever!" This is one of the most clear and definite statements of the deity of Jesus that comes from the apostle's pen. I know there are manuscripts suggesting that this is to be translated as a closing doxology that says "God be blessed and praised forever." But the best manuscripts do not put it that way at all. The most ancient manuscripts agree that this is what the apostle wrote: "Christ is God over all, blessed and praised forever!"

And yet, with all these fantastic advantages, with the remarkable achievements and possibilities of this nation, the Jews of Paul's day were violently anti-Christian. They could not stand the idea that Jesus was their Messiah. Paul could see evidence, even at this date, of the approaching crisis between the Jews and the Romans that would result in the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and judgment upon this nation. They would be scattered throughout all the nations of the world for centuries. Paul saw that coming.

This was written about 62 A. D., and already events were moving to bring about that final confrontation when the Roman armies would surround the city and eventually break through the walls, destroy the temple, level it to the ground, and take the Jews captive and send them out into all the nations of the world, fulfilling the word of Jesus that this would occur. And yet, despite these fantastic advantages, remarkable and unique in all the nations of the world, Israel had proved to be faithless. That is what breaks the apostle's heart.

Now Paul raises a question, and here he gets into the heart of this chapter: Did this also mean that God was faithless? Has God failed? Did Israel's failure come about because God is not able to save those whom he wants to save? Is that the problem?

A lot of people think that is the problem. They wonder if God is really able to save someone whom he calls. So this is a problem that is relevant in our day.

Paul answers by launching upon a great statement that sets forth the faithfulness of God -- but in terms that we struggle with. I want to warn you before we get started that you are going to have a difficult time with the ninth chapter of Romans. Way back in the prophet Isaiah's day, God had said to Isaiah, "My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts," {cf, Isa 55:8-9}. Whatever else those words might mean, they certainly imply that there are times when God is going to act in ways that we don't understand, ways that seem absolutely contrary to the way he should act.

I think this is one of the major problems that we face in dealing with God. There have been times when I have been bewildered and baffled by God's behavior. I have seen solutions to problems of deep importance, I could see how to work them out -- but God seemed totally unable to catch on. Even when I have told him how to solve them, rather than take the simple steps that would have worked out the solutions (as I saw them), he persisted in going into deeply involved relationships and circumstances that seemed to have no bearing at all in the working out of this problem. I am confronted, finally, with the truth of Isaiah's words. God is beyond me. Now, that is the attitude we must keep in mind as we go through this chapter.

Paul begins to introduce this to us by showing us some of the principles by which God works in carrying out his great work. There are three principles that we want to take this morning. The first one is that we must understand that great opportunities and special privileges that God may grant to nations or to individuals, such as those he has just listed for Israel, do not necessarily imply that God intended in any way to save those people.

Here is how Paul establishes his argument:

First, he says, salvation is never based on natural advantages, Verses 6-7:

It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are

Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. {Rom 9:6-7a NIV}

Now, two of the patriarchs are mentioned, Jacob and Abraham. Israel, of course, is another name for Jacob. God named him Israel after Jacob wrestled with the angel, for Israel means, "A prince with God." God made Jacob, the usurper, into a prince. But those who are his descendants are not necessarily involved in all those promises. Even those who are physical descendants of Abraham, the greatest of the patriarchs, are not all included in the salvation promise of God.

Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that salvation is never based on natural advantages. It is not inherited.

Your family may have been Christians, but that doesn't make you a Christian. You may have had great opportunities for Bible study and Bible knowledge, and maybe you have taken advantage of them -- but that doesn't necessarily make you a Christian. These special privileges that come to us by natural means are never the basis for God's redemption. That is the first thing we have to understand.

But, in contrast to that, the second thing is that God's salvation is always based on a divine promise. Now look at what Paul says, Verses 7-9:

On the contrary, "Through Isaac shall your offspring come." In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I [God] will return, and Sarah shall have a son." {Rom 9:7b-9 NIV}

This takes us back to the eighteenth chapter of Genesis, where God said to Abraham and Sarah, "I will come back, and Sarah, whose womb has been barren all her life -- who has never had a child, who is now ninety years of age and, from a natural point of view, couldn't possible have a child -- is going to have a baby," {cf, Gen 18:10}. It was a biological miracle, and that was God's promise. It involved his own supernatural activity. His promise is based on what he does, not upon what men do.

As we well know, Abraham had another son, Ishmael, the oldest boy. He was thirteen years older than Isaac, the firstborn of Abraham. By rights, he should have inherited the promises that God made to Abraham, but he didn't. Instead, Isaac inherited those promises. Ishmael stands as a symbol of the futility of expecting God to honor our ideas of how he is to act.

Remember how Ishmael was born? Sarah said to Abraham one day, "Do you expect God to do everything? He has promised you a son, but you are getting old. Time's wasting. Surely, God doesn't expect you to leave it all up to him!" {cf, Gen 16:1-2}. So she suggested that he take her Egyptian servant. He did, and she conceived and bore a son whose name was Ishmael. Ishmael was brought before God by Abraham, who said, "God, here is my son. Will you fulfill your promises to him?" {cf, Gen 17:18}. God said, "No, I won't. That is not the one. He must come by divine promise," {cf, Gen 17:19-21}.

I think this is a very important principle in Scripture. I find a lot of people who get an idea of what they think God ought to do. They ask him to do it, and, because they have asked him to do it -- in line with what they think are the promises about prayer -- they think God has to do it. They misread all the promises about prayer and think that if they get an idea of what they want, God has to do it. But what this teaches us very plainly is that God is committed to do only what he has promised to do. If you want God to act on your behalf, find a promise that he has given.

Some of you this week saw the film on Aimee Semple McPherson, that rather remarkable woman evangelist of the early part of this century who was the first of the well-known faith healers of this country. She and others who have followed her since have taught people that God has promised that he would heal all physical ailments. They tell people to claim healing from God. They say that if we would just claim what God has promised, God will do it.

You know, I've been studying the Scriptures for thirty years or more, and I can't find that promise! It just is

not there! God has never, anywhere, promised to heal all physical illnesses. I would invite you to share it with me if you know where it is. He does heal, and often he will respond to the requests of his children -- but he has never promised that he will. Therefore, we are wrong when we try to claim from God something that he never promised to do. That is why anything expected from God must rest upon a promise that he has already given. Otherwise it is merely his grace that supplies an answer to our requests. That is the second principle here.

Now we come to the, third, which is even more difficult to handle, Verses 10-12:

Not only that, but Rebecca's children had one and the same father, our ancestor Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad -- in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls -- she was told, "The older will serve the younger." {Rom 9:10-12 NIV}

Do you remember who Rebecca was? She was Isaac's wife. He found her through his servant, who had been sent to find God's choice for Isaac. Now, that is a remarkable statement, and Paul confirms it with a quotation from Malachi 1:2-3:

Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." {Rom 9:13 NIV}

Many have struggled over those words. But all the apostle is saying is that it is clear from this story that:

- First, ancestry does not make any difference (these boys had the same father), and,
- Second, what they will do in their lives -- including the choices they will make -- ultimately will not make any difference.

Before they were able to make choices -- either good or bad -- God had said to their mother, "The elder shall serve the younger." By that he implied, not only that there would be a difference in the nations that followed (the descendants of these two men) and that one would be in the place of honor and other wouldn't, but, also, that the personal destinies of these two men were involved as well. I think that is clear from the record of history. Jacob forevermore stands for all the things in men that God honors and wants them to have. Jacob was a scheming, rather weak character -- not very lovable. Esau, on the other hand, was a rugged individualist -- much more admirable when he was growing up than his brother Jacob. But through the course of their lives, Jacob was the one who was brought to faith, and Esau was not. God uses this as a symbol of how he works.

I remember hearing of a man who said to a noted Bible teacher, "I'm having trouble with this verse, 'Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.' How could God ever say 'Esau have I hated'?" The Bible teacher said, "I have trouble with that verse, too, but my problem is not quite the same. I have no trouble in understanding the words 'Esau have I hated.' What bothers me is how God could ever say 'Jacob have I loved!'" Read the life of Jacob and you will see why.

Now, I do admit that we must not read this word "hated" as though God actually disliked Esau and would have nothing to do with him and treated him with contempt. That is what we often mean when we say we hate someone. Jesus used this word when he said, "Except a man hate his father and mother and brother and sister and wife and children and houses and land, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple," {cf, Luke 14:26}. Clearly he is not saying that we have to treat our mothers and fathers and wives and children and our own lives with contempt and disrespect. He clearly means that he is to have pre-eminence. Hatred, in that sense, means to love less. We are to love these less than we love him.

God didn't hate Esau, in the sense we usually employ that word. In fact, he blessed him. He made of him a great nation. He gave him promises which he fulfilled to the letter. God did not hate Esau in that usual sense. What these verses imply is that God set his heart on Jacob, to bring him to redemption, and all Jacob's followers would reflect the possibilities of that. As Paul has argued already, they were not all necessarily saved by that, by any means, but Jacob would forever stand for what God wants men to be, and Esau would forever stand as a symbol of what he does not like.

Do you know the final confrontation of Jacob and Esau that is recorded in the Scriptures? It was when Jesus stood before Herod the king. Herod was an Idumean, an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. Jesus was, through David, a descendant of Jacob. There, standing face-to-face, were Jacob and Esau! Herod has nothing but contempt for the King of the Jews, and Jesus will not open his mouth in the presence of Herod. This is God's strange and mysterious way of dealing with humanity. Now, I don't understand it, but I have to submit to the fact that God is greater than I. His ways are not my ways, and his thoughts are not my thoughts.

What Paul is teaching us here is that God has a sovereign, elective principle that he carries out on his terms. Here are those terms:

Salvation is never based on natural advantages. Never. What you are by nature does not enter into the picture of whether you are going to be redeemed or not.

Second, salvation is always based on a promise that God gives. This is why we are exhorted in the Scriptures to believe the promises of God. It includes, in some mysterious way, our necessity to be confronted with those promises, and to give a willing and voluntary submission to them. I do not understand that, but Paul brings this up a little later in this chapter when he discusses the harmony, as far as we can understand it, between the free will of men and the sovereign elective choice of God.

The third principle is that salvation never takes any notice of whether we are good or bad. Never! That is what was established here. These children were neither good nor bad, yet God chose Jacob and passed over Esau.

Now, I want to close at this point, because it is too much to take along with the next section. But I want to ask you this question: "How do you react to what we have covered so far? Is there something in you that wants to cry out to God and say, 'God, that's unfair! That isn't right!'"

When I preached this message at the 8:30 service this morning, a man walked out the door cursing God because he treated men this way. Do you feel something like that? Then relax, because you are normal. There is something in us called the flesh that reacts to this; it doesn't like it. Paul is going to pick that up later in this chapter and we are going to face it squarely and find out what we can about this sense of unfairness that we have toward God in this regard. But, in the meantime, let us reverently accept the fact that God is greater than we are. He knows more than we, he knows what he is doing, and everything he does will always be consistent with his character. God is love. Whether we can understand it or not, that is where it is going to come out.

Prayer

Our Father, once again we have to admit we don't understand very much. We are finite creatures, and how much we feel it at this moment! We certainly are not gods, and we don't understand how you act. But we believe you are faithful to us, and that you tell us the truth, and that it does us good to seek to understand. We will seek to do that, Lord, but keep us from being rebellious, from charging you with injustice. Help us to be open and teachable in spirit, that we might recognize the marvelous grace that has reached out to us and found us. Help us to understand what you are doing with the rest of the world as well. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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