

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS  
*Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch*  
*Lesson 12 - Romans 8:31-9:18*

**Romans 8:31-8:39**

With this segment, "God's Love in Christ Jesus," we come to the end of chapter 8 and the end of a major section in Paul's letter. In chapters 5 through 8, Paul gives numerous examples to convince his readers that God truly loves his people. Now, in these last few verses of chapter 8, Paul becomes poetic. He reaches the highpoint of his joy as he proclaims the certainty of God's love for us and the fact that nothing can ever separate us from this love.

In verse 31, Paul returns to the technique of asking questions. He does this to capture his readers' attention and to prepare them to follow his explanation of how certain they can be of God's love. He asks, "What then are we to say about these things?" "These things" means all the signs and events Paul has described which show God's love. If God, who is all powerful and all loving, is showering his people with his love then who can hinder God in his plan to bring us to himself?

The second half of verse 31 can have two answers. The answer Paul is looking for is "No one!" No outside power is able to separate us from God. Paul is certain of this because of the victory we share in the resurrection of Christ. But there is another way to understand this question in which the answer could be, "Lots of people!" If we try to live a Christ-like life, we can expect opposition from many people. They will be against us, not in the sense that they can separate us from God, but in the sense that they do not want to hear the message of Christ. Many of the standards of our society are not the standards of Jesus Christ. Our society does not like to hear about morality and chastity, sacrifice and compassion for the poor, respect for life and taking responsibility for one's actions. But Paul is speaking of a different level of reality.

In verse 32, Paul makes use of a reference which his Jewish readers would immediately recognize. When he speaks of how God "did not withhold his own Son" his readers would be reminded of Abraham and how he was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham was blessed for this and God made him the father of many nations. The connection which Paul makes is that if Abraham is admired and trusted for what he did, then how much more should we admire and trust God who did, in fact, give us his own Son.

At the end of verse 32, Paul says that if God was willing to give his most precious gift, the gift of his own Son, then there can be no doubt that he will give us everything else he has promised. This means that the kingdom will reach completion. Jesus will reign as Lord of the universe. And the glory which God promises us most certainly will come as we share the life and love of the Trinity.

In verse 33, Paul envisions the scene of a court setting. Christians are on trial and Paul wants to know who will bring a charge against us. God is the judge at this trial, but he is also the one who gave us his own Son. Jesus is our defense attorney and he is the one who died for us. If this is not enough, we could borrow a verse from John 14:16 in which Jesus says to his apostles at the Last Supper, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." The Spirit is another defense attorney pleading our case before the God who loves us. How can we lose?!

If someone does bring a charge against us, we know that God has already justified us. He has made us righteous. The charge will not stand. If someone does condemn us, neither will this stand. Jesus has died for us. The price of our redemption has already been paid. Jesus not only died for us but he was raised up for us, and now he is at the right hand of the Father. At this right hand, Jesus knows the will of the Father, and his will is that we receive everything. Jesus is there to intercede for us. To say the least, the court is stacked in our favor!

Paul introduces verse 35 with the direct question, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Even with the excitement and enthusiasm of his discourse, Paul still has his feet on the ground. He knows that the Christians are suffering for the sake of the faith. He has experienced this himself to a great degree. But Paul says that no matter what sufferings may come in this life, they cannot separate us from God. Even death itself is not a hindrance to our union with God. Jesus has already conquered death. It cannot hold us.

In verse 36, Paul quotes Psalm 44:22. This is a community psalm of lament. Even when Israel has been faithful to God, they are still subject to suffering and persecution. Paul quotes this verse to show that the suffering endured by the Christians is not a punishment for their sins. From the beginning of the faith, good people have suffered for the sake of God. Suffering may even be a sign that Christians are being faithful to their calling.

At the beginning of verse 37, Paul answers the list of previous questions. He says that the hardships which are endured do not stop God from loving us. Paul even goes so far as to say that in these sufferings we are the ones who are victorious. We know this is true because Jesus has conquered sin and death in his resurrection. By our baptism we share this victory with Christ.

In the final two verses of this chapter, Paul lists the most forceful powers confronting humanity. Neither death nor life can separate us, for death is but the passage into God's presence and in this earthly life we already share his divine life. Angels, rulers and powers are categories of spirits. There was a belief among the Jews that the angels were jealous of human beings. The angels did not want God to create humans because they did not want to share God. This present age is contrasted with the age to come when all creation will be transformed. Even these dramatic alterations will not cause a separation.

The "height and depth" is probably a reference to astrological beliefs. Many of the pagan cultures believed that the stars controlled the destiny of a person. This belief had a minor impact on the thoughts of the Jewish people. At its height, the star had its greatest influence, and at its depth, it was ready to impose itself upon a new individual.

Paul concluded by saying that nothing in all of creation can stop the love of God from enfolding us. Paul is certain of this because of the gift of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the perfect revelation of the Father.

#### **Romans 9:1-5**

With today's verses, we begin a new segment and a new, major section within Paul's letter. Chapters 9 through 11 address one question: Why did the Chosen People, the Jews, not accept the Promised Messiah?

Paul begins this examination by looking at "God's Election of Israel." Paul still prides himself on his Jewish heritage. He knows that the Jews have received a special call from God to be of service in the plan of salvation. God formed them into a people from whom the Messiah would come. But only a faithful remnant accepted Jesus as Lord.

The emotions expressed in verse 1 make it clear that what Paul is about to say is of a most serious nature. He speaks the truth "in Christ." He calls upon the Holy Spirit to confirm the sincerity of his words. Verse 2 continues the same degree of intensity. Paul is revealing a wound that resides deep within his heart. His sorrow is caused by his own people.

At the end of chapter 8, Paul proclaimed that nothing could separate him from the love of God. God's love is the supreme gift bestowed upon humanity. This truth makes the words of Paul in verse 3 all the more remarkable. He says that he would be willing to be cut off from Christ if, by doing so, he could bring his people into union with Christ. This is the ultimate sign of Paul's sincerity. He feels no hatred or animosity toward the Jews even though he has suffered at their hands. He truly seeks their salvation.

In verses 4 and 5, Paul lists the many blessings which have been given to the Jewish people. He begins by using their proper name, Israelites. Then he lists seven particular blessings. At the end of verse 5, Paul proclaims their greatest privilege - that the Messiah came from them.

The name "Israelites" is derived from the new name given to Jacob. In Genesis 32:22-32, we have the account in which Jacob wrestles with a heavenly being. When Jacob prevails, he is told that he is granted the name Israel.

Paul reminds his readers that the Jewish People were adopted by God. They were chosen for service in God's plan of salvation for all people. They witnessed the glory of God manifested in the Exodus event and in his presence in the Temple. They participated in the covenants with Noah, Abraham and Moses. They were given the privilege to have come to pure monotheism, the worship of the one, true God. This worship continued in the Temple as they sacrificed the Passover lamb. God's blessings continued in the promise of a new age when the Day of the Lord would come and free Israel from all enemies. All of these blessings began with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The promise of an heir to Abraham, and that he would be the father of many nations of people, has indeed been fulfilled.

The greatest blessing to the Jews is that the promised Messiah came from their own people. But the majority of Paul's people rejected the very one who was the ultimate expression of God's love. This is the cause of Paul's anguish. How can this be? What does this mean for the Jewish people? Paul will continue to delve into these questions and try to discern the plan of God.

#### **Romans 9:6-18**

As we begin today's commentary, we will look at two points which need to be understood in order to grasp what Paul is saying in these verses. The first point is what Paul means by selection or election. The second has to do with the Hebrew image of God. Let's look at the first idea.

Remember the main question Paul is addressing in chapters 9 through 11: Why did the Chosen People, the Jews, not accept the Promised Messiah? In today's verses, Paul wants to show that the Chosen People never included all the physical descendants of Abraham. For example, Abraham had another son, Ishmael, who was as much his physical descendant as was Isaac. But Isaac was the child of promise. Isaac was the one who would carry on the family line. In Genesis 21:18, God says of Ishmael, "I will make a great nation of him." The common belief among the Jews was that Ishmael was the father of the Arab nations. How unusual today to think of the Israelis and the Arabs as having a common ancestor and father in Abraham.

Paul then goes on to use another example. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. They were twin brothers, and yet God chose Jacob and not Esau. Esau became the father of the Edomites, but they were not considered among the Chosen People. The main point which Paul makes is that God chooses whomever he wants to choose. Only certain people were chosen in the past to be the ones who would carry on the promise.

Similarly, Paul says that only certain people, the elect, were chosen to be the ones who would accept the gift of faith in Jesus Christ. Election of some people and rejection of others is something which is difficult for us to accept today, but this was the thinking of the Hebrew people and it is the argumentation Paul uses. Paul sees this same principle being applied to the new People of God.

The second point is actually the foundation for the first point. The Hebrew people had a particular image of God which conditioned their way of thinking. The Hebrews believed that everything which happened in the world - and they meant literally everything - was intentionally, willfully, and directly caused by God. If Pharaoh's heart was hardened, it was because God made this happen. If someone was ill, it was because God was punishing that person for something. The list could go on. Around the time of the Babylonian exile, cir. 587 B.C., their image of God began to change. The exile caused the Jewish people to admit that many of those who were suffering had not sinned. They had not been unfaithful to God. They were innocent people. This realization caused them to rethink their view of God's control over the world. Yes, God created the world and put everything in motion, but perhaps there are events which happen in the world which God permits, but does not directly will. God never wills sin to happen, but he allows it because of the free will he gave to humanity.

What we are dealing with here is the distinction between the Hebrew or Semitic way of thinking and the Greek way of thinking. For the Hebrews, God is personal and immanent. He has feelings and he responds to the human cry for help. He has an intense interest in everything and controls everything. The Greek image of God is quite different. God is transcendent and aloof. He created the world, but he isn't all that interested in it. He has no feelings and can never be affected by the prayers of human beings.

The advantage of the Hebrew mentality is that God is responsive to human needs. He cares about his people. The disadvantage is that it blames God for many things he does not will. This mentality that God causes everything is still seen today in our society when we hear people say "That flood last summer is a sign that God is punishing us for something." Or, "Why did God give me this cancer?" We will eventually see that Paul uses this same reasoning to explain why so many of the Jewish people did not accept Jesus. Paul will say that it was part of God's plan.

The advantage of the Greek mentality and view of God is that it does not blame God for everything. Greek thought can speak of the permissive will of God. He may permit things to happen, but this does not mean he intentionally caused them. The disadvantage of the Greek view is that God seems very impersonal. This view can lead to deism, meaning that God created the world but then has nothing further to do with it, or agnosticism, meaning that God is so remote we could never be in relationship with him.

Christianity is based on the belief that the transcendent God chooses to be intimate with his people. He loves us and has always loved us, even becoming like us in the Incarnation. In our Christian way of thinking, we incorporate both the Hebrew and Greek thought in our understanding of God. We recognize that our human concepts can never describe the full identity of God. Our minds cannot grasp the infinite. But, we also believe that God has revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the gift of the Father's love.

In verse 6, Paul states that the word of God has not failed. The term "word of God" relates back to Paul's use of the word "promises" in verse 4. God had promised that Abraham's family line would continue. Has this promise been kept? God promised that he would always be the God of the Chosen People. He promised that they would be the recipients of God's blessings. Have these promises been kept? Paul realizes that if the people have doubts about these promises, they may also doubt God's promise of salvation through Jesus Christ.

In the second half of verse 6, Paul begins to draw distinctions to support his statement that God's word has not failed. Paul says that not all of Abraham's physical descendants were included among the Israelites. Paul will point out that all through Israel's history, God freely chose only some of the people to be the ones who would continue the line of the true Israelites.

In verse 7, Paul quotes Genesis 21:12. He reminds his readers that from the time of their father Abraham, God had already indicated his plan of selection. God chose some and rejected others. Isaac was the heir to the promise.

Verse 8 repeats the theme that physical descent is not sufficient for membership among the Chosen People. We need to remember that Paul is going to stress this point in his explanation of why many of the Jews did not accept Jesus.

Paul quotes Genesis 18:10 in verse 9. In God's plan of selection and election, he not only chooses one who is available, he also alters the norms of physical nature and creates the one he wants. Sarah was physically unable to have children because of her age. But God changed this in order to show that he had the power to make his promise come true.

In verse 10, Paul moves onto the next generation. Paul probably envisioned some of the people saying, "Well of course there was a difference. Isaac's mother was Abraham's wife. Ishmael's mother was a slave girl." But Paul reminds his readers that Isaac's wife, Rebecca, was the mother of both Jacob and Esau. And even though they were twin brothers, God still chose one over the other, and he even chose the younger over the elder. Election has always been part of God's way of working out his plans.

In verses 11 through 13, Paul begins to hint at how he is going to apply this reasoning not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. He says that even before Jacob and Esau were born, God had already indicated his choice. The election of Jacob was not due to any work he had accomplished. Jacob did not earn his election. Similarly, Paul will go on in chapter 11 to say that the Gentiles did not earn God's love. God freely chooses to love whomever he wants. Paul will return to this thought when he repeats his teaching that salvation is a gift from God, it cannot be earned.

In verses 14 and 15, Paul raises a question which he knows is on the minds of his readers. They are asking, "Isn't this method of election arbitrary and unjust? How can God show mercy to one and not to another?" Paul responds out of his Jewish background. He says that God can do whatever he wants to do. Paul quotes the text of Exodus 33:19 to support his view. What we must keep in mind is that Paul is speaking from the Hebrew mind-set. The Greek view of God is not brought into this argument.

Verses 16-18 reiterate God's complete freedom and control. His benevolence toward humanity is a free gift. It cannot be earned and is not deserved. But also, God can raise up individuals for his own purpose, as he raised up Pharaoh to show what happens to someone who opposes his will. In the Hebrew image of God, God controls every event and action in history.

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