

Paul dropped a bomb in the previous section, because he made it perfectly clear that our salvation doesn't have anything to do with us or anything that we do, but it depends only upon God. Because the promise was made through Isaac and not through Ishmael. And the promise was made through Jacob and not through Esau. And even though they were all the sons of Abraham, even though they were all his descendants, they were not all children of the promise, because it depends on God alone and not on anything within us. It depends on God's choice, God's election, his free choice of us, and not because of anything that we do. Salvation is from God alone.

And the reason why that's a little bit of a bomb is because I think in some way we want to have it be dependent on us, even just a little bit. Maybe God does 99% of our saving. He does almost all the work, but we still want that 1% to depend on us. That something that we do or something that we are counts for something before God. But Paul shows that it doesn't count for anything at all. Jacob was chosen by God even before he was born. Jacob was chosen by God even before he had done anything whatsoever, whether good or bad. It was God's choice. Jacob--and Esau, for that matter--had nothing to do with it at all.

But maybe we struggle with that. Maybe that doesn't seem very fair to us. Why didn't Esau have a chance? Why didn't God give something to him? Why did God not choose him? Is God wrong when he chooses Jacob and not Esau? Is God unjust to save us without us having anything to do with it? Paul answers that question. He says: "By no means!" God is not wrong to do this, because salvation is never about who we are, but only about what God has done for us.

And to prove that point, Paul goes on to quote several Old Testament passages. And the first one that he quotes is from Exodus chapter 33, verse 19, which says: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So God is not going to be forced to do anything. If God shows mercy, it is because he chose to show mercy and not because of anything in us. Because in Exodus chapter 33, Israel had just committed the very great sin of the golden calf. And God had brought judgment down upon them rightly for that sin. 33,000 of them died in a single day under God's wrath. And Moses in chapter 33 is interceding for Israel. He's praying to God asking him to come back to his people, asking him to show mercy and to forgive them. And God does it. God does show Israel mercy. But then Moses asked God one more thing. He says, "Please show me your glory." Moses wants to see a glimpse of who God is in himself so that he can know that God is going to keep his promises. He wants to know for sure that God is going to stay with his people, and so he asks to see him without anything in between. But God says no. "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." God's not going to be forced to do anything. If God shows mercy to Israel, it's because he chose to show mercy to Israel. Because they certainly didn't deserve it. Not at all. But God chose to show them mercy because he is faithful to his promises.

And Christians, the same is also true of salvation. God will show mercy to those whom he chooses, because it doesn't depend on him who wills or him who runs, as verse 17 could also say. It doesn't depend on what I do or what I think. It depends on God and God alone. He is the one who saves us. He is the one who does it all. Our salvation comes from him.

And Christians, the fact that it all depends on God is also true when he doesn't choose someone. This is why Paul goes on to quote Exodus chapter 9, verse 16, which says: "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So here in Exodus chapter 9, God is speaking to Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron. And God has just told Pharaoh that he could have destroyed him and just left it at that. God could've crushed Pharaoh and saved his people and brought them out of Egypt, just like that. But he didn't do it, because God had raised Pharaoh up for a purpose, so that by Pharaoh fighting back against God, God would get glory. Because even though it seemed impossible that Israel should ever get out of Egypt, God was still going to do it. And so Pharaoh's rebellion would glorify God's power. It would show that he is a God who can do anything. And so God hardened him for that purpose, hardened him so that he wouldn't listen to him, so that through Pharaoh, God would be glorified. And God was right to do so, because God didn't owe Pharaoh anything, just like he doesn't owe us anything either. Because he says, "I will have mercy on whomever I will, and I will have compassion on whomever I will." It is God's choice alone.

But maybe that makes us uncomfortable. Maybe that makes us ask, along with Paul in verse 19: "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" Why would God hold Pharaoh accountable for anything? Wasn't it God who did it? Why does God hold anyone accountable, if he is the one who does it all? That's the question that we might be struggling with. But Paul does a very interesting thing here, Christians. He never actually answers this question. Most of the time in the book of Romans when he asks a question like this, he'll almost immediately answer it and then go on to explain what he means. Paul likes to be very clear about things. But here he doesn't do that. Instead, he says in verse 20: "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" This is a question that we have no right to ask God. God is God, and we are not. God is God, and he will do what he pleases. We have no right to put him on trial, to get him to explain himself to us in a way that satisfies us, as if God was our employee or something and had to give an account of what he was doing. God is God, and we are not. A potter can shape the clay however he pleases. How much more for God? And if God chooses one and not another, we have no right to ask him why. Because salvation comes from him alone and does not depend in any way on us.

But this is still a great temptation for us, Christians, because I personally as a sinner, as well as each one of us, I want to think that I'm the most important thing. That God somehow has to answer to me. "Why did you do this, God? Why did you not do this? Why don't you do things the way that I think they should be done?" I'm tempted to think that I'm somehow wiser than God, to think that he has to answer to me, that if he just did everything my way, then everything would be better. Then it would all make sense to me. But that's just like Adam in the garden of Eden wanting to become like God, wanting to be the one who decides what is right and what is wrong.

And the same is also true of salvation. I want to think that God somehow owes it to me, that God owes me an opportunity, that God owes me a chance for his love. Maybe not those people over there. They've done some pretty bad things. I can understand if God doesn't want to give it to them. But God needs to answer to me. That's what I think in my pride. Otherwise it wouldn't be good.

But God doesn't owe me anything, Christians. God doesn't owe anyone anything. Because what I deserve, what God really owes me, is judgment, his wrath. Because Pharaoh was not condemned unfairly. Pharaoh was condemned because of his sins, and rightly so. Israel was not condemned unfairly. They were condemned because of their unbelief, and rightly so. And if I am condemned, it's not unfair. I would just be condemned for my sins, and rightly so. Because I have rejected God, and I have sinned against him. And God's not obligated to give me anything, because the only thing he owes me is wrath.

But Christians, wrath shows just how glorious his mercy truly is. Because God didn't owe us mercy, yes, but he still gave it to us through his Son, Jesus Christ. You didn't do anything to deserve it. By no means! It happened long ago, even before you were born, even before you knew God. God prepared vessels of mercy for his glory. God chose those who would believe in him. And even though they deserved his wrath, even though they deserved his judgment, God showed them mercy through Jesus Christ, his Son. Not just for the Jews. but also for the Gentiles. All are being called together by grace to believe in him. And how glorious that is! To know that even though God didn't owe you anything, he called you to faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, to save you from your sins.

This is why Paul goes on to string together some quotes from the Old Testament to show this point. He quotes from Hosea chapter 2, verse 23, and Hosea 1, verse 10, to show that those who were not his people and didn't deserve to be his people are now called his people. Those who were not beloved are now beloved because of God. And those who didn't deserve anything other than God's judgment are now called the sons of the living God. God shows his mercy to us through his Son. And he also quotes Isaiah 10, verses 22 and 23, to show that not all of Israel is saved because of who they are. God doesn't owe anything to them. They deserve his judgment. But God saved some of them, a remnant of them, and gave them his mercy through Jesus Christ, even despite their sins which were so great. And he also quotes Isaiah 1, verse 9, saying that if God had not saved some of them, they would've become like Sodom and Gomorrah, utterly destroyed because of their sins. And rightly so. But God saved offspring for Israel because he chose them freely through his Son, Jesus Christ. Because salvation depends, Christians, on God and not on us.

And how wonderful that mercy truly is! To know that God has shown us his love even when we didn't deserve it. So that there is no need for us to ask: "Am I worthy?" Because I'm not. There is no need to ask: "Have I done enough to make God love me?" Because I haven't and I never will. But God still calls you to be his own through Jesus Christ, showing you that mercy, even though you didn't deserve it. So even if your sins are as black as night, Christians, there is mercy in Jesus Christ. Even if you wonder how God could ever forgive you for the things that you've done, there is forgiveness in Jesus Christ. And it is all the more wonderful, because we didn't deserve it, but God gave it to us anyway through his Son.

So is there injustice on God's part? Not at all. Because justice would mean that we would all be condemned for our sins. But God didn't give us what we deserved. God shows mercy on whom he shows mercy. He shows us mercy, the undeserving, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to forgive us our sins. Help us always to trust in him alone, knowing that nothing in ourselves is worthy of your love, but Jesus has done it all for us. In his name we pray. Amen.